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HENRY WINTER'S COLUMN

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Where England's 2017 U17 World Cup winners are now as the latest edition gets ready to get underway in Qatar

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It has long been my suspicion that young footballers are better now than they've ever been. So many of the high-profile teenagers that have burst onto the scene over the last decade or so seem to have unprecedented levels of intelligence and maturity, plus the precociousness and fearlessness that have always made youngsters so exciting. This issue of *World Soccer* bears that theory out, as we take a closer look at a whole host of Under-20 starlets – Gilberto Mora, Can Uzun, Ethan Nwaneri and many others – who are really excelling right now. The future seems to be bright.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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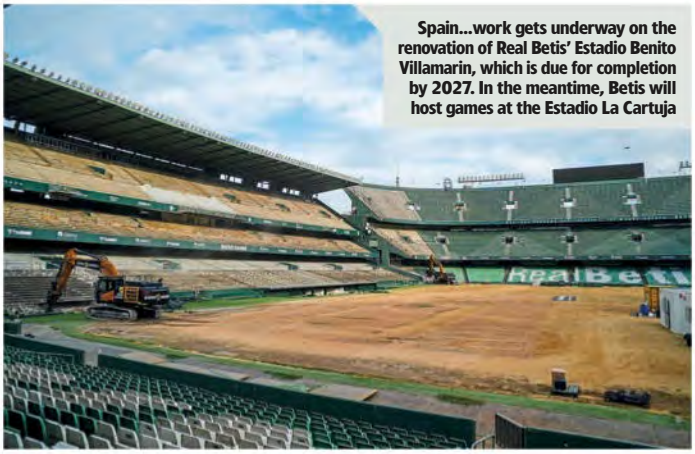

Spain...work gets underway on the renovation of Real Betis' Estadio Benito Villamarin, which is due for completion by 2027. In the meantime, Betis will host games at the Estadio La Cartuja

Spain...Alexander Sorloth celebrates with supporters after scoring for Atletico Madrid during their 5-2 victory over city rivals Real Madrid

France...a giant tifo is unveiled by Lens supporters ahead of their *Derby du Nord* clash against Lille, which they went on to win 3-0

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China...fans gather in front of giant screens to watch an amateur game in the Jiangsu City Football League *(more on page 26)*

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Argentina...fans read tributes to Boca Juniors manager Miguel Angel Russo, who died in October ***(full tribute in next month's issue)***

Chile...Mexico's Gilberto Mora celebrates after helping his team reach the quarter-finals of the Under-20 World Cup ***(more on the U20 World Cup to follow next issue, more on Mora on page 24)***

Canada...Thomas Muller lifts the Canadian Championship trophy, his first piece of silverware since joining Vancouver Whitecaps in the summer ***(more on page 86)***

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

We'll always have Kolkata

Looking back on England's victory at the Under-17 World Cup in 2017

World champions... England's Under-17s side celebrate after winning the final in 2017 in India

When Steve Cooper coached the England Under-17s side, he stuck a string of instructions on the wall of the players' meeting room at St George's Park. Some were about ways of quietening the crowd, others about frustrating the opposition and working the referee. Nothing was left to chance by Cooper in preparations to win the Under-17 World Cup in 2017.

Cooper flew out to India twice for recces, checking out the facilities and climate. He stayed on after the draw and visited venues where England could play. He spoke to England cricket staff on pitfalls of playing in India. He talked to coaches who'd worked out there like Steve Coppell.

England were so well-prepared. None of the other teams had a backroom staff as big as England's. Cooper took a psychologist who worked with him on his body language towards the players, setting the tone. The medical staff were meticulous, taking players' urine samples every day. The FA sent 15 performance staff out to the tournament. Cooper and his players were backed all the way, and they went all the way.

The latest edition of the competition takes place in Qatar in November. England's coach, Neil Ryan, aims to try to repeat Cooper's success and inspirational qualities with young players.

One of the reasons behind Cooper's recent decision to pick Brondby over several Championship clubs was the Danish outfit's desire for him to develop players. He's very good at it.

Also on the wall of St George's were further instructions aimed at all age-group players: "STARTERS preparation, body language, work hard, know roles (and others), respect for finishers." Even when trailing 2-0 to Spain in the final in front of 66,684 in Kolkata, England's body language remained strong. They had resilience, recovering to win 5-2. They had Cooper's teaching to "be brave on the ball".

Six of the players involved in that final triumph are now full England internationals. Marc Guehi, Morgan Gibbs-White and Phil Foden are all excelling in the Premier League, all playing in Europe and have more than 75 senior caps between them. Guehi brought alert defending and leadership, Gibbs-White creativity and energy, and Foden was named Player of the Tournament for his goals, assists and exquisite touch.

They had wide players like Callum Hudson-Odoi, who won three senior England caps under Gareth Southgate back in 2019, and Steven Sessegnon delivering crosses to Rhian Brewster, a finisher in the form of his life.

And the subs were ready. Also on the wall at St George's was an instruction for those who begin on the bench: "FINISHERS prepare like you are starting, attitude towards training/

team, concentration, encourage starting players, ready to be used at any time". Angel Gomes and Conor Gallagher, who completed the six who have stepped up to the seniors so far, came on in the final.

It's a year group celebrated for winning the Under-17 World Cup but it wasn't a launch pad for all. Even some of those at good academies, like Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City, found the pathway to the first team too challenging. Nya Kirby, who came off the bench in the last 16 to convert the decisive penalty against Japan, failed to make the grade at Spurs, then struggled at Crystal Palace. The midfielder went on loan to Blackpool and Tranmere Rovers before drifting into Non-League with Oxford City and currently Croydon Athletic.

Cooper's keeper, Curtis Anderson, a prospect at Manchester City who also nailed his penalty against Japan, made an astonishing save in the final from Juan Miranda, who was then close to breaking into the first team at Barcelona (and now at Bologna). Anderson fell out of the professional game, retired in 2023, and became a financial advisor helping footballers.

Too many young players receive huge sums. They need expert advice they can trust. Anderson understands the game, and knows what it is like to be feted young, so can give insightful advice. At 18, he was keen for more minutes so left Manchester City for the States but gradually fell out of love with the game. He's now helping the game.

Six of the players involved in that final triumph are now full England internationals: Marc Guehi, Morgan Gibbs-White, Phil Foden, Callum Hudson-Odoi, Angel Gomes and Conor Gallagher

The defender, Joel Latibeaudiere, was also at City. He stayed in the game but dropped down to Swansea City and now Coventry City, and switched his international allegiance to Jamaica. Almost three quarters of players on the England pathway are also eligible for other countries.

Brewster, who is still eligible for both Turkey and Barbados, was the bright young striking hope at Liverpool, dreaming of following the pathway of Robbie Fowler and Michael Owen. He scored successive hat-tricks in the quarter-finals and semis, poached another goal in the final, taking his tally to eight and the Golden Boot, but his career drifted. He never kicked on at Liverpool, and although he made the bench in the 2019 Champions League final, and paraded with a medal, he was moved on, released by Sheffield United and is now at Derby County.

Sessegnon went from Fulham and is now at Wigan Athletic. Centre-back Jonathan Panzo went from Chelsea's academy and, seven clubs later, ended up in Portugal at Rio Ave. Midfielder George McEachran, also in the Blues development scheme at Cobham, is now in League Two with Grimsby Town.

The midfielder, Tashan Oakley-Boothe, was at Spurs while becoming champion of the world, dropped into the EFL, headed to Portugal and now Scotland with Dunfermline Athletic.

The Boys of 2017 are scattered all over, and their inspirational coach in Denmark, but wherever they are, whatever level they are playing at, Cooper and his players will always have the memory of the glory of Kolkata.

The 2025 U17 World Cup kicks off in Qatar on November 3. We'll review the tournament in our January issue

Setting the Ballon d'Or record straight

Football is tribal, social media is volatile, and there will always be some who prefer Lamine Yamal to Ousmane Dembele as their player of the year or, like last year, Vinicius Junior to Rodri. But there was no conspiracy in Dembele winning the Ballon d'Or. He deserved it, and won by a landslide from Yamal (1,380 points to 1,059) just as Rodri deserved it last year narrowly ahead of Vinicius (1,170 to 1,129).

In my experience, there was no communicating between the 100 jurors. Again, in my experience, player agents and clubs know jurors are so proud of the honour that we'd run a mile if approached. We sign a confidentiality/integrity document, and rightly so. Just because a club pushes a player on its social media channels or encourages influencers doesn't mean they are approaching jurors. Just because a manager responds to a question on a player's Ballon d'Or credentials doesn't mean jurors will pay attention. Some, it appears, do vote on patriotic grounds (hello Scotland and Georgia).

But it's disrespectful to the award, to the organisers and to the deserved winners, as well as the jurors, to suggest there was any collusion or conspiracy. It's actually possible to argue that Pedri and Raphinha had better seasons than Yamal. African fans claiming that a European conspiracy denied Mo Salah overlook the fact that half the African jurors voted Dembele as No.1.

2025 Ballon d'Or winner...Ousmane Dembele with the coveted prize

Critics also have to appreciate the timing. The West Ham United vice-chairman, Dame Karren Brady, wrote in her recent newspaper column of her confusion that Lionel Messi won the award in 2023 "even though he spent some of that season playing in the American pre-retirement league for Inter Miami. That has got to be some sort of joke". Messi also played for Argentina in the voting period for the Ballon d'Or – or "Ballon D'oh" as Brady termed it. That period, August 1, 2022 to July 31, 2023, included the World Cup in Qatar, where Messi lifted the trophy and the Golden Ball.

Brady, banging the drum for the Premier League with her usual style and gusto, also lamented that "great players like Dennis Bergkamp, Eric Cantona, Alan Shearer, David Beckham, Thierry Henry, Frank Lampard, Steven Gerrard, Virgil van Dijk, Kevin De Bruyne...got into the top three for the Ballon d'Or but never won". Well, nor did Paolo Maldini, Franco Baresi, Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Neymar, Kylian Mbappe or Robert Lewandowski. They've never played in the Premier League.

Manchester City's Rodri does, and won the Ballon d'Or last year, much to Real Madrid's fury. In a way, it's good there's so much anger. People care. Individual awards matter.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The Diarra precedent

As another footballer uses the Lassana Diarra case to force through a move, is a transfer revolution on the way?

Nothing gives the footballing powers-that-be cause for setting aside their own scuffles and uniting behind a common cause quite like a footballer with ideas above their station. Woe betide the player who dares put their head above the regulatory parapet.

Very few dare. A player's career is short, hence the fear that taking on the establishment can wipe away crucial club contract income and all the sponsorship bonuses baked into the pay-as-you-play system. Jean-Marc Bosman in the early 1990s was one, George Eastham 30 years earlier another. Before them, the on-strike stars who fled Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay for a pirate El Dorado in Colombia in the late 1940s.

Making the football foundations tremble now is Lassana Diarra. FIFA thought it had dealt with the gauntlet he threw down by amending the small print in the transfer regulations. But another player, Lucas Ribeiro, has defied the lawyers' best re-draft. Here is an issue which is not going away and which might – just might – provoke the most significant transfer system revision since Bosman threw Europe's door wide open 30 years ago.

In short, here is the story so far: retired former France midfielder Diarra, once of Chelsea, Arsenal, Portsmouth, Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille, signed for Lokomotiv Moscow in 2013. Within a year, they had fallen out and Diarra's contract was terminated. The Russian club then complained to FIFA whose dispute resolution chamber found Diarra had breached its regulations on the status and transfer of players. It ordered him to pay €10 million in compensation. Diarra appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport which upheld FIFA's judgment.

Diarra's lawyers then complained to the Court of Justice of the European Union, which found that FIFA's rules governing the way some transfers work infringed EU law on free movement and competition. This opened the way for Diarra to launch civil action for €65m compensation in the courts in Belgium where he now lives.

Clearly, chaos would be the outcome if players or clubs could rip up a contract whenever they felt like it. However, Diarra's contention was that a player with a grievance should not be denied the right to find a new club for fear of a multi-million euro compensation claim. So FIFA rewrote some of the rules.

Not quickly or effectively enough, it seems.

In August, lawyers acting for Brazilian forward Lucas Ribeiro used the Diarra ruling to force an exit from South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns and a subsequent transfer to Cultural Leonesa, recently promoted to the Spanish second tier.

This was a heavy blow to the Sundowns and their owner, Patrice Motsepe, the president of CAF and a close ally of FIFA boss Gianni Infantino. The Brazilian had been a star for the South African champions ever since arriving in 2023, finishing as the best player and top scorer in last season's Premiership victory. His ability to play at a higher level was demonstrated

Mamelodi Sundowns departure...Ribeiro played his last game for the South African champions at the Club World Cup

> Here is an issue which is not going away and which might provoke the most significant transfer system revision since Bosman

in the summer, when he scored the Goal of the Tournament at the Club World Cup.

Sundowns and the South African FA applied in vain for FIFA to block an international transfer certificate. Ribeiro's lawyers used the Diarra precedent to argue successfully that such a block would contravene EU freedom of movement of labour laws. Compensation, claim and counter-claim could wait for another tribunal, another court, another day.

Everyone has a different viewpoint, depending on vested interests.

For FIFA, football is not just a business but a global community and the world governing body's rules exist to ensure integrity, balance and fairness between clubs and players across continents. It grudgingly accepts the need to adapt to European laws as clarified by the Court of Justice but believes change should be undertaken with caution so as not to undermine competitions and club finances.

FIFPRO, the international players' union, objected to FIFA's initial transfer rule changes on the basis that fiddling with words was no substitute for a comprehensive renegotiation of the transfer system. Footballers were not entertainers treated too long as tradable commodities, and football could not claim to be the world's game if it failed to respect the rights of the people who play it.

Somewhere, stuck in the middle, are the vast majority of clubs who lack multinational sponsors or the security of sovereign wealth funds. For them, low-level scouting of talent and young player development is the foundation of financial security. Survival for them would be threatened by a wave of such cases with clever lawyers capitalising on any disciplinary wrangle to justify a walkout.

The Diarra case and Ribeiro's follow-up do not guarantee immunity but may make managers think twice about banishing unwanted players to train alone or with the youth teams.

This is just the beginning. This one will run and run.

Landmark case...the European Court of Justice found in favour of Lassana Diarra last year

CONTRACTUAL CONFLICTS

1948-49 El Dorado *(Colombia)*
A players' strike in Argentina prompted Colombian clubs in the Dimayor league outside FIFA's jurisdiction to sign a swathe of stars without paying a transfer fee. The schism was ended in 1954 by the "Pact of Lima".

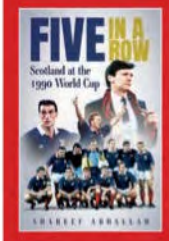
1963 George Eastham *(England)*
Eastham challenged the "retain and transfer" system in English football in the first legal case taking on club control. The system had allowed clubs (in his case Newcastle United) to hold a player's registration even after his contract expired. The High Court assessed the system as unreasonable restraint of trade.

1979 Abolition of the *contrat à vie (France)*
The French government reformed sports law to scrap the *contrat à vie* (contract for life) system after Saint-Etienne sold their striker and captain Georges Bereta to Marseille without his knowledge or consent in 1975. The case had prompted public outrage that Bereta had no say in the matter.

1995 Jean-Marc Bosman *(Belgium)*
The Belgian challenged transfer rules preventing him from moving freely at the end of his contract from RFC Liege to Dunkerque. The European Court of Justice ruled in his favour, allowing players to move fee-free at the end of contracts within the EU. This led to the abolition within the EU of most foreign player restrictions.

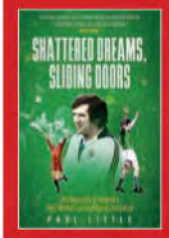
Revolutionary... Jean-Marc Bosman

BOOKS THIS MONTH



FIVE IN A ROW
By Shareef Abdallah (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Relive Scotland's epic journey to and at the 1990 World Cup in Italy: the trials and tribulations, the dramatic games and goals that defined Scotland's fifth World Cup in a row. Just how did the unheralded Andy Roxburgh lead Scotland through a tough qualifying group to *Italia '90*? Featuring players' and fans' stories, this is the definitive account.



SHATTERED DREAMS, SLIDING DOORS
By Paul Little (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Shattered Dreams, Sliding Doors chronicles the Republic of Ireland's infamous 1982 World Cup qualification campaign, while painting a vivid picture of 1980s Ireland through the eyes of a young football supporter. The book also ponders how a golden generation of Irish players might have fared had they qualified for *Espana '82* and the potential impact on manager Eoin Hand's career and on the broader Irish game.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

'Pepism is over'

The new season has seen the pre-dominant possession-based tactical trends replaced

Before Tottenham Hotspur's Champions League game away to Bodo/Glimt at the end of September, the Norwegian side's goalkeeper Nikita Haikin reflected that it was "unusual to see a team like Tottenham" focusing so much on "long throw-ins and slow throw-ins. Free-kicks from all over the pitch." It didn't appear intended as a criticism; rather he was pointing out a fact, seemingly with a degree of admiration. A couple of weeks earlier, after Brentford had equalised against Chelsea with a goal from a long throw, the Bees' manager Keith Andrews observed that long throws had become "fashionable" now that big teams were practising them – he, of course, having been set-piece coach at the club, already had experience of trying to exploit them.

Change, when it happens, is often rapid. Almost from the moment Pep Guardiola became Barcelona manager in 2008, the orthodoxy has been towards possession. Press high to regain the ball, then keep it; as Johan Cruyff always said, the opposition can't score if they don't have the ball.

New era...Arsenal v Manchester City was a clear example of changing tactical trends

With data shaping attacking patterns and discouraging crossing and long shots, a paradox was created, as Jorge Valdano pointed out, whereby teams seemed more prepared to take risks in their own box than the opposition's.

But football is a ruthlessly rational game. Paradoxes like that don't last long. In the past few months, teams have begun kicking for touch from kick-off. Set-plays are back. Where the top sides once took corners short, rushing to get the ball back in play to begin the carousel of passing again, now they take their time, going through their set routines, trying to maximise the advantage they can gain. Over the first month of the season, 25% of all non-penalty Premier League goals came from set-plays, a 21% rise on the figure for last season, and the highest proportion in the last decade.

> It's not surprising that there would be a reaction against possession football. That's how evolution happens: a dominant mode emerges and then it is challenged

Work positions, try to isolate opposing defenders or, even better, create overloads. In its earliest days, football was a game of position, which is why goalkeepers would kick long – "get it down there!" – but in the past couple of decades it's become a game of possession, technique trusted sufficiently that, for elite sides, the default was to take goal-kicks short. Better to have the ball in your own box than let the opponent have it in theirs. Provoke the press, draw the opposition out, look to hit the space behind them.

More broadly, there has been a pragmatic revolution. Even Guardiola ended up in the second half at Arsenal sitting his side deep, defending their own box. City in that game had just 34% possession, only the second time any Guardiola side has ever had less than 40% possession in a league game. Teams are going longer and not pressing so high. Total passes per game is at a 15-year low. Long balls are up 7% on last season. High turnovers are down on last season and a massive 31% down on two seasons ago.

It's perhaps not that surprising

No more "Pepism"... Guardiola's approach has shifted

that there would be a reaction against possession football. That's how evolution happens: a dominant mode emerges and then it is challenged. That mode adapts and either maintains its pre-eminence in slightly revised form, or it sinks.

After years of Guardiola football changing – at one point, Pepism and the Stuttgarter School of ultra-hard pressing of which Jurgen Klopp was the prime exponent effectively morphed into each other – it has abruptly reached a point at which it feels as though evolution is not enough.

There is, though, no agreement as to what comes next, and the result is a complex and contradictory landscape in which coaches experiment. If there is a unity in their approach, it is only in the recognition that things have to change; that Pepism is over and what remains is confusion. "I think there is no more Stuttgart *Schule* or whatever!" the England manager Thomas Tuchel said in August. He had been one of the prime followers of that German high-press model.

"I think there is so much going on on a football field that it is scary," he went on. "There is man-marking, there is [going] from zonal into man-marking, there is deep blocks, there is back three, there is back four, long throws are back, the long ball from the goalkeeper is back. Everything is back, and everything changes between matches and it changes even within matches. Change of position is back. Overlapping, underlapping is back. It's demanding. It's very, very demanding."

It's a confusing environment but it is, at least for Tuchel, a thrilling one. The world thrums with possibility. It's often said that football is cyclical, but that's not quite true, because everything happens with knowledge of what went before. So while a more direct style does appear to be returning, with a renewed emphasis on set-plays, it does so with the refracted memory of Pepism. And if that sounds inherently contradictory, that is one of the great fascinations of football.

Emanuel EMEGHA

(Strasbourg)

When it was announced that the Strasbourg captain would join Chelsea at the end of the season, fans of the Alsace club were outraged. Since being taken over by BlueCo in 2023, supporters feel they have become a feeder club to the Blues, that they are being "taken for fools" as a banner in the stands declared. Another, addressing Emegha, read: "After changing your jersey, give up your armband."

Six other players have moved between the two clubs this year, including left-back Ishe Samuels-Smith who left Chelsea for Strasbourg only to return to Stamford Bridge just weeks later without playing a game.

Amidst all the noise, Emegha remains a promising prospect. The tall, Dutch-born forward scored 14 Ligue 1 goals last season and began the new campaign with two goals and two assists in his first four appearances.

Facundo BUONANOTTE
(Chelsea)
Chelsea took advantage of a new UEFA rule permitting clubs to make temporary amendments to their Champions League squads in the event of "long-term injury or illness". The Brighton loanee came in to replace Dario Essugo.

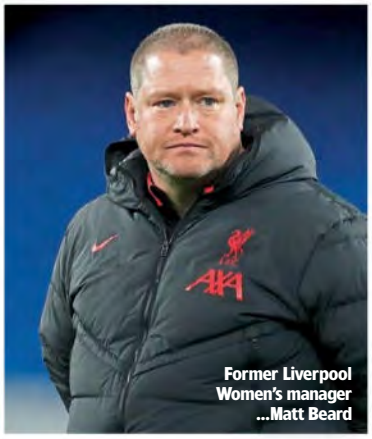
Gus POYET
(Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors)
The former Brighton and Sunderland boss is loving life in his first season in South Korea, with his team running away with the K League title.

Cristian OROZCO
(Fortaleza)
Captain of the Colombia side that reached the final of the South American Under-17 Championship to qualify for the U17 World Cup, Orozco will reportedly join Manchester United when he turns 18 in July 2026.

Victor OZHIANVUNA
(Shamrock Rovers)
Another teen set to move to the Premier League when he turns 18, the Republic of Ireland U17 international will join Arsenal in January 2027.

Reigan & Jaden HESKEY
(Manchester City)
Ex-England striker Emile Heskey was watching on as his sons Reigan, 17, and Jayden, 19, both made their senior Manchester City debuts in the Carabao Cup tie with Huddersfield Town.

OBITUARIES


Former Liverpool Women's manager ...Matt Beard

Matt BEARD (1978-2025)
A successful manager of Liverpool Women, leading the club to back-to-back Women's Super League titles in 2013 and 2014. After spells with Boston Breakers, West Ham United Women and Bristol City Women, Beard returned to Merseyside in 2021 and got the Reds promoted back to the WSL.

Willie McFAUL (1943-2025)
Goalkeeper who played for Linfield and Newcastle United, and who would have won far more than his six caps for Northern Ireland had it not been for the all-time great Pat Jennings.

Jose ARAQUISTAIN (1937-2025)
Araquistain, another in the long line of outstanding Basque specialists, was the original "cup goalkeeper". He played just one league match throughout the 1965-66 season for Real Madrid but stepped up for the second leg of the European Cup semi-final and again for the final after Antonio Betancort pulled a muscle in the semi-final first leg against Internazionale. Madrid's famed *"Ye-Ye"* generation, with Araquistain in goal, beat Partizan 2-1 in the final in Brussels. This was personal redemption four years after the 1962 European Cup final defeat by Benfica when he was heavily criticised for conceding two long-range goals in the dim light of the old Amsterdam Olympic Stadium.

Araquistain had joined Madrid in 1961 from Real Sociedad, winning six league titles and one Spanish Cup. He was awarded the Zamora Trophy in 1961-62 as the best goalkeeper in La Liga and played six internationals, including Spain's final group game at the 1962 World Cup finals in Chile.

Tourqui SALIM (1958-2025)
Former president of the Comoros Football Federation who registered the tiny African island nation as a FIFA member in 2005.

Allan COLE (1950-2025)
At 15, Allan "Skill" Cole became the youngest-ever player to be called up for Jamaica's national squad and later played in three World Cup qualifiers. A playmaker and striker with local clubs Real Mona, Boys' Town and Santos FC as well as Atlanta Chiefs in the United States and Nautico in Brazil, he later moved into the music industry as a tour manager with Bob Marley & the Wailers and has been widely credited as co-writer of the song *"War"*.

Oscar CALICS (1939-2025)
A midfielder who played six times for Argentina, including once at the 1966 World Cup. Began his club career with Banfield in 1958, playing a pivotal role in their promotion to the Primera Division in 1962, before joining San Lorenzo in 1966 and helping them win the 1968 Torneo Metropolitano. Later also won a title in Colombia with Atletico Nacional.

Jonathan GONZALEZ (1995-2025)
"Speedy" Gonzalez starred as a winger for Ecuador's LDU and Independiente del Valle, Leon in Mexico and Olimpia in Paraguay. Won four caps for Ecuador.

Bobby GRAHAM (1944-2025)
Scottish-born forward who made his name at Liverpool, scoring on his debut in the Reds' first-ever European game at Anfield. A succession of top forwards at the club – Ian St John, Roger Hunt, Kevin Keegan and John Toshack – meant he rarely held down a first-team place during his eight years there, to the extent that he didn't play enough games to receive a medal for the 1966 league title win. Left for Coventry City in 1972 and later played for Tranmere Rovers, Motherwell and Hamilton Academical.

Roger Menama LUKAKU (1967-2025)
Former Zaire striker who played at the 1994 and 1996 Africa Cup of Nations – scoring at the latter – but was better known as father of Romelu and Jordan, both Belgium internationals. Romelu was named from the first two letters of his father's three names. Roger scored six goals in 13 games for Zaire (now DR Congo) and lined up in Belgium with Boom, Seraing, Germinal Ekeren, Mechelen and Oostende. Also played briefly in Turkey with Genclerbirligi.

Lukaku senior ...Anderlecht pay tribute to Roger Lukaku

Former chairman ...Milan Mandaric

Ecuador international ...Jonathan Gonzalez

Milan MANDARIC (1938-2025)
Yugoslav-born Serbian-American businessman whose fascination with football led to him launching San Jose Earthquakes in the United States and later owning or part-owning Belgium's Standard Liege and Charleroi, Nice in France, and then Portsmouth, Leicester City and Sheffield Wednesday in England.

Jan LALA (1938-2025)
At 23, the right-back was one of the youngest members of the Czechoslovakia squad that finished runners-up at the 1962 World Cup. He missed the final, a 3-1 defeat to Brazil, after being injured in the semi-final victory over Yugoslavia. Played 402 games for Slavia Prague and won 37 caps with one goal before moving abroad to Lausanne in 1969.

Dejan MILOVANOVIC (1984-2025)
Former captain and midfielder with Red Star Belgrade, son of former Red Star player Djordje Milovanovic and cousin of ex-Chelsea defender Branislav Ivanovic. Made his Red Star debut in 2001 and made more than 200 appearances in winning three league titles and four domestic cups. Helped guide Serbia to the final of the 2007 European Under-21 Championship in the Netherlands and went on to win two senior caps.

Jaime RODRIGUEZ (1959-2025)
El Salvador defender nicknamed *"La Chelona"*, The Turtle, for his calmness under pressure. Scored one goal in 50 senior internationals between 1979 and 1991, including all three of El Salvador's matches at the 1982 World Cup in Spain where he marked Diego Maradona in a 2-0 first-round defeat by Argentina. After retiring, Rodriguez held significant administrative roles as president of the Salvadoran Institute of Sport and as a member of FIFA's football commission.

Javier SANCHEZ (1947-2025)
Defensive stalwart of the Cruz Azul team that won 11 trophies before adding four more with Club America, including the Copa Interamericana in 1978. Won over 50 caps for Mexico between 1968 and 1977, and also represented *El Tri* at the 1968 Summer Olympics on home soil.

Billy VIGAR (2003-2025)
The 21-year-old Chichester City striker, a graduate of the Arsenal youth academy, tragically died following an injury during his team's game at Wingate & Finchley. Following the incident, the FA announced that it will carry out an immediate safety review of perimeter walls at football grounds in the National League system.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

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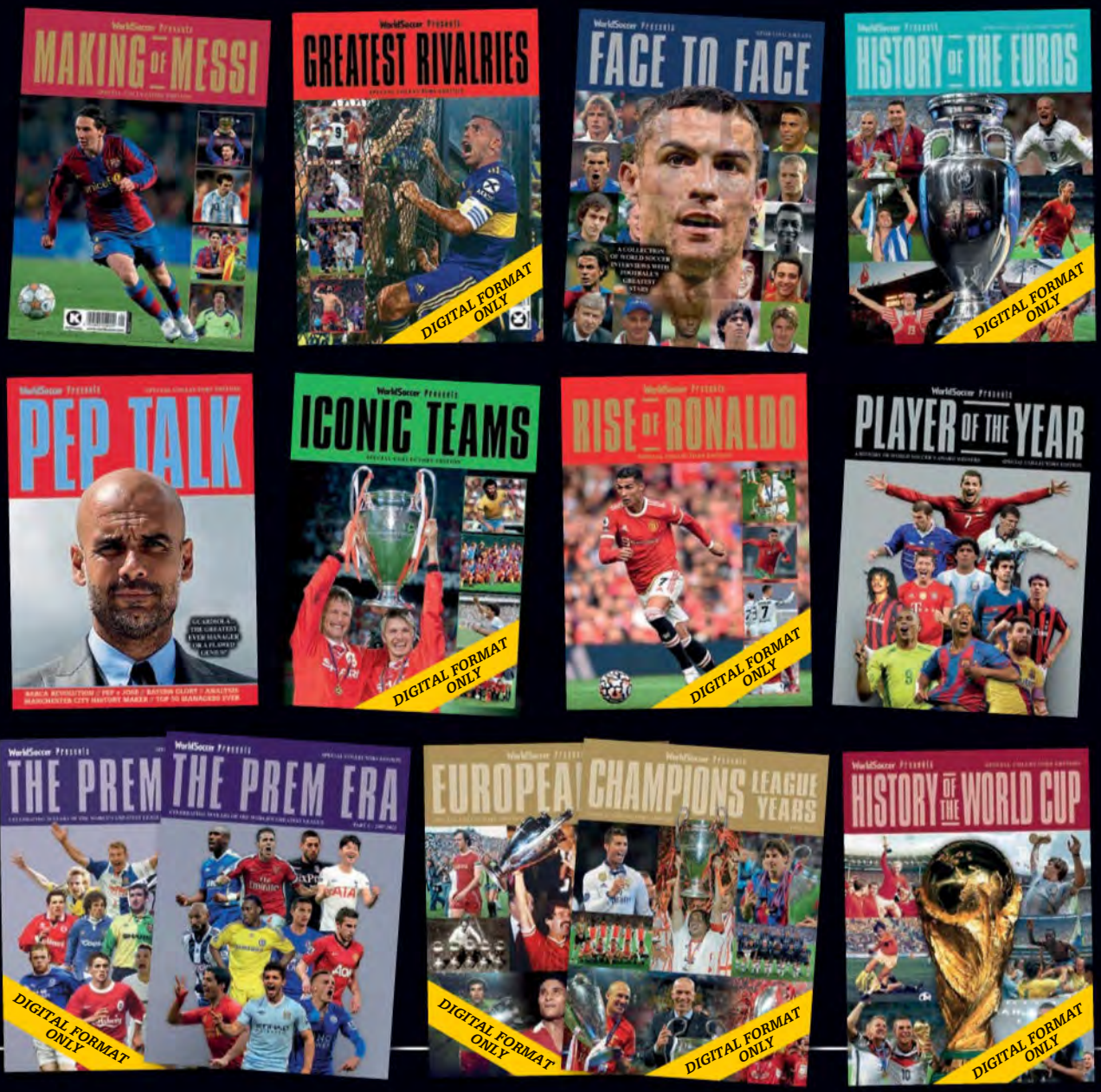

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"I cannot be deprived of the right to practise my profession. I have decided to assert my rights like any worker who is prevented from doing their job"

Brazilian left-back Renan Lodi walks out on Al Hilal after being left out of their Saudi Pro League squad list

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

MONCHI

Aston Villa's president of football operations stepped down from his role after two years, replaced by Real Sociedad's former sporting director Roberto Olabe.

Gerardo SEOANE

Seoane was the Bundesliga's second managerial casualty of the season after being sacked by **Borussia Monchengladbach**. Eugen Polanski will serve as caretaker.

Steve COOPER

Almost a year after being axed by Leicester City, Cooper was appointed by Danish side **Brondby**. In his first game, he led them to a 2-1 victory over local rivals FC Copenhagen.

Laurent BLANC

Just a few months after guiding **Al Ittihad** to a league-cup double in Saudi Arabia, Blanc was fired following a poor start to their Asian Champions League campaign.

Sergio BUSQUETS

The Barcelona and Spain legend will retire at the end of the current MLS season with **Inter Miami**. He says he will become a coach after taking a sabbatical from the game.

Jordi ALBA

The left-back followed in his long-term team-mate's footsteps by also announcing that will retire at the end of 2025, despite only signing a new deal with **Inter Miami** in May.

Samuel UMTITI

Another former Barca defender also announced his retirement. A 2018 World Cup winner with France, Umtiti, 31, had been a free agent since leaving **Lille** in July.

Bas DOST

Two years after suffering a cardiac arrest during an Eredivisie game for **NEC**, the 36-year-old was forced to retire. The ex-Netherlands striker scored over 250 career goals.

Anthony MARTIAL

The ex-Manchester United striker became the latest big name to join Mexico's Liga MX, following the likes of James Rodriguez, after departing AEK Athens for **Monterrey**.

Juan MATA

After spending the last campaign with Western Sydney Wanderers, the Spanish playmaker moved across the A-League to join **Melbourne Victory** for the 2025-26 season.

Stefano SENSI

Once regarded as Italy's next big thing, scoring three goals in nine *Azzurri* caps, Sensi joined Cypriot side **Anorthosis**, three months after being released by Monza.

Luca ZIDANE

The son of French World Cup winner Zinedine, who made 30 appearances in goal for France's various youth sides, switched to **Algeria** ahead of the October internationals.

SEPTEMBER 2025

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	2
Mile Svilar (Roma)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	6
Gabriel (Arsenal)	5
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	5
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	4
Marc Guehi (Crystal Palace)	3
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	3
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	2
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	1
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	4
Pedri (Barcelona)	4
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	4
Luka Modric (Milan)	3
Vitinha (PSG)	3
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	2
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	2
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	1
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	10
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	9
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	5
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Antoine Semenyo (Bournemouth)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

"While it is regrettable to have to let these two games go ahead, this decision is exceptional and shall not be seen as setting a precedent"

Aleksander Ceferin confirms that UEFA will reluctantly allow Milan's Serie A clash with Como and Villarreal's La Liga match v Barcelona to take place in Australia and the United States respectively

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

16
Teams that will compete in next year's Women's Africa Cup of Nations in Morocco, an increase on the 12-team tournament that took place in the summer.

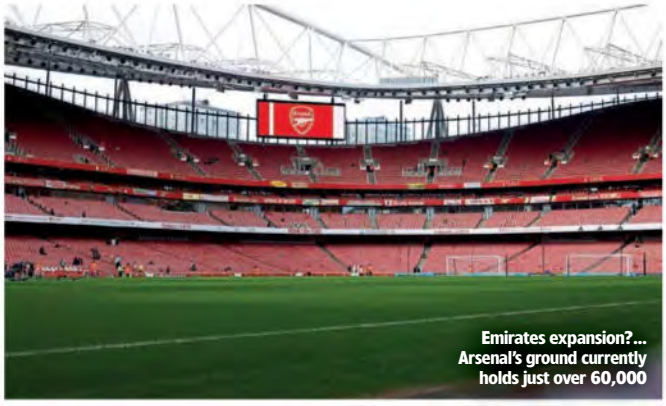
2
International breaks that will occur in the autumn of 2026 after FIFA announced a change to the men's international football calendar. From next year, the September and October breaks will be merged, with teams able to play up to four international matches from September 21 to October 6.

€994m
Barcelona's revenue according to their latest financial report, as the club looks to navigate its way away from financial difficulty.

200
Goals that French forward Antoine Griezmann had scored for Spanish giants Atletico Madrid after netting in the Champions League victory over Eintracht Frankfurt.

Club legend... Griezmann marks his 200th Atleti goal

104
Games that it took Bayern Munich's Harry Kane to net 100 Bundesliga goals – no player has ever reached a century in one of Europe's top five leagues quicker. Kane beat Cristiano Ronaldo's record, set with Real Madrid in La Liga, by one game.



Emirates expansion?... Arsenal's ground currently holds just over 60,000

70,000
Potential capacity of Emirates Stadium after it was revealed that Arsenal are considering an expansion to their ground.

1
Scottish players to have scored a Bundesliga hat-trick after Union Berlin's Oliver Burke became the first to do so in a 4-3 victory over Eintracht Frankfurt.

49
Games that it took Manchester City's Erling Haaland to reach 50 Champions League goals, breaking the record previously held by Ruud van Nistelrooy on 62.

97
Goals that Denis Bouanga had scored for LAFC after bagging a hat-trick against Real Salt Lake to take him clear of Carlos Vela as the club's record goalscorer.

637
Days that Australia and Chelsea Women's striker Sam Kerr spent on the sidelines through injury before returning to WSL action in September, scoring her 100th goal for the Blues in the process.

1
Azerbaijani clubs to have won consecutive UEFA Champions League games after Qarabag achieved the feat against Benfica and Copenhagen.

123
Days that Russell Martin was manager of Rangers before being sacked, the shortest reign in the club's history. His win-rate of 29% is also an all-time club low.

3
Players to have played over 500 games for Atletico Madrid after goalkeeper Jan Oblak passed the milestone against Liverpool (read our Oblak interview on page 60).

9
Teams that will compete in next year's Canadian Premier League after FC Supra, based in Laval, Quebec, were confirmed as the next club to join.

189
Club goals scored by Steven Fletcher – plus ten in 33 caps for Scotland – after the former Wrexham, Sheffield Wednesday, Sunderland, Hibernian, Stoke and Wolves striker hung up his boots.

48
Teams that will compete in the upcoming Men's Under-17 World Cup in Qatar, double the previous number.

4.5m
Fans that applied for tickets for the 2026 World Cup during its first pre-sale draw.

2026-27
Season that promotion and relegation is expected to return to Liga MX after CAS ruled out lifting the suspension a year early. There has been no movement between Mexico's top two tiers since COVID struck in 2020.

3
Points that South Africa were deducted in World Cup qualifying after they were found to have fielded an illegible player in their 2-0 win over Lesotho in March.

Points deduction...Teboho Mokoena should have been suspended for South Africa's WC qualifier against Lesotho

41
Years and 341 days, the age of Nice defender Dante when the Brazilian played against Roma in the Europa League, making him the oldest outfield player in the competition's history.

60
Champions League goals scored by Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe after his hat-trick against Kairat – moving him up to sixth in the all-time scoring charts.

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Gilberto Mora

The future of Mexican football arrives just in time for the 2026 World Cup

Between 2021 and 2024, the best way to describe the mood around Mexico's national team was "doom and gloom".

El Tri were eliminated from the group stage of the 2022 World Cup, finishing third in a group that contained Argentina, Poland and Saudi Arabia, ending a run of seven consecutive last-16 appearances.

Diego Cocca, appointed in the aftermath of Qatar, lasted just a few months in the role before a sorry 3-0 CONCACAF Nations League semi-final defeat to the United States cost him his job. His successor, Jaime Lozano, didn't last long either, knocked out in the group stage of the 2024 Copa America after defeat to Venezuela and a goalless draw with Ecuador.

With the 2026 World Cup at home, the Mexican FA decided to take no further risks and appointed the veteran Javier Aguirre as head coach, on the premise that a firm, familiar hand would steady the ship, as the 66-year-old had done before in other moments of crisis in 2001 and 2009.

So far, "*El Vasco*" (The Basque) has done just that. With a sober, no-frills style, Mexico reclaimed the Nations League and Gold Cup titles in 2025, wresting regional control back from the United States. After the September international break, *El Tri* had lost only two of 17 matches under their new manager and were on a nine-game unbeaten run.

Yet while the former Atletico Madrid coach has added a bit of stability back to the team, nobody has done more to raise the spirits of Mexican football fans than Gil Mora, the most exciting talent the country has produced in years.

Born on October 14, 2008, Mora has not stopped breaking records since his Liga MX debut in August 2024. When he came off the bench for Tijuana against Santos Laguna at the age of 15 years and 308 days, he became the third-youngest player ever to play in the league; 12 days later, he became the youngest starter and youngest goalscorer in the league's history.

In January this year, Aguirre surprised many by calling Mora up for an unofficial tour of South America with *El Tri*, and shocked them even more by considering him for the 2025 Gold Cup squad in the summer. The plan had been to take him along for experience and give him a few minutes in the tournament, but his training performances were so impressive that the manager took the risky decision of throwing him into the action. Mora started the quarter-final against Saudi Arabia and, at 16 years and eight months, became Mexico's youngest-ever senior international.

Wonderkid...Mora in action at the Gold Cup in the summer

> Nobody has done more to raise the spirits of Mexican football fans than Gil Mora, the most exciting talent the country has produced in years

Record breaker...Mora celebrates becoming the youngest goalscorer in Liga MX history

Mora seized his chance in the 2-0 victory and kept his place for the remainder of the tournament, which ended with Mexico defeating the United States 2-1 – their first competitive win over them in six years – restoring Mexico's status as the region's heavyweights over their arch-rivals. The title also made the playmaker the youngest player to ever win an international trophy anywhere in the world.

Young prodigies usually stand out for their pace and dribbling,

but Mora is slightly different. Standing at just 5ft 5in tall – albeit with some growth left in him – the midfielder is distinguished by his intelligence, positional sense, and ability to find team-mates in dangerous areas. His style is closer to Andres Iniesta or Mesut Ozil than to traditional Latin American playmakers.

After the Gold Cup triumph, Mora announced on social media that he had signed with renowned international agent Raffaela Pimenta. That move was part of a plan devised by his father Gilberto Senior, a former professional himself, and Tijuana owner Jorge Hank to make the youngster the most expensive sale in Liga MX history. That will have to wait until he turns 18 in October next year, as required by FIFA regulations, but a lucrative move to Europe feels inevitable.

In the meantime, there are plenty of challenges for him to take on. In the Under-20 World Cup, which concluded on October 19, he was tasked with carrying the team's hopes on his shoulders – particularly shining with a brace against Spain in the group stage – despite being one of the youngest members of the squad. Usually when a player has established himself in the senior team they stay there, but Aguirre, who makes the decisions on selection rather than the youth coaches, saw merit in giving the prodigious talent tournament experience.

Indeed, *El Vasco* could even send Mora to the upcoming U17 World Cup in Qatar as well, although at the time of writing that is still to be decided.

Whatever the decision, it will be taken with a view to putting Mora in the best possible position for the 2026 World Cup on Mexican soil, where he is likely to become the sixth-youngest player ever to take part in the tournament.

To say he will carry a nation's hopes may be a touch exaggerated, but there is no doubt that he has played a massive role in shaking supporters out of their pessimism. If nothing else, they have a hero to root for, a story to believe in. Hopefully he can live with the pressure.

Martin del Palacio Langer

Claudia Scheunemann

Meet the youngest international footballer in the history of the game

Youngest-ever international... Indonesia starlet Scheunemann

In April 2023, during a qualifier for the 2024 Paris Olympics between Indonesia and Lebanon, Claudia Scheunemann made football history. By making her international debut at the age of just 13 years and 349 days old, she became the youngest player in the history of international football.

Playing for the Under-18s just a few weeks prior was remarkable enough, pitching her against opponents five years her senior. But having scored in that game, she was swiftly promoted.

The young forward has attributed her rapid progress to being raised in a footballing family. Her father, Ralph, left his home in Germany to play semi-professionally in Indonesia, representing Gajahyana in the city of Malang. Her uncle Timo is a former manager of the Indonesia women's team, now coaching the Under-17s, while her cousin Brandon is a central defender for Arema in the Indonesian first division.

Her journey began in Jakarta at the age of eight, joining a boys' team and quickly standing out as an exceptional talent. Five years later, she was playing international football – and the rapid ascent didn't stop there. At 15, she scored her sixth international goal to become Indonesia women's all-time top goalscorer.

That record was broken in last year's AFF Women's Asian Cup, a competition for some of the smaller nations in Southeast Asia. It was the first piece of silverware that the team have ever won, with a squad containing a number of young players with foreign heritage.

Indonesian football has received a boost in recent years by tapping into the diaspora, with the men's team coming closer than ever to World Cup qualification thanks to a number of European-born players.

Scheunemann's dream is to follow in the progress of the men's side and lead the women to a World Cup, although that is still some way off. Indonesia are already out of contention for the 2027 finals, failed to qualify for next year's Women's Asian Cup and collected just one point during the ASEAN Women's Championship during the summer.

The gap between Indonesia and the world's best was cruelly demonstrated in October 2024, when they travelled to the Netherlands for a friendly and were beaten 15-0. For Scheunemann though, it was a positive experience. As well as enjoying the challenge of sharing a pitch with world-class players, it also gave her a valuable taste of Dutch football. In the summer, she signed a three-year contract with FC Utrecht.

It was a landmark move – few Indonesian-born players get the opportunity to play in one of Europe's major leagues – but also an inevitable one, given that Indonesia does not yet have its own women's league.

Scheunemann has expressed her frustration at this, but if she can make an impact in Europe and increase her profile, she could be in a position to drive change. She certainly has enough time on her side.

Anirudh Nair & Gina Bagnulo

Jiangsu City Football League

The grassroots movement that could offer a different kind of future for Chinese football

Packed house... fans cram inside the Kunshan Olympic Sport Centre for Suzhou v Yangzhou

China has tried the top-down approach in football, perhaps more than any other country, and without success. In 2011, soon-to-be President Xi Jinping talked of his "three wishes": to add a second World Cup qualification to the 2002 debut, to host the tournament and then, to go and win it.

At the time, things were starting to happen in the Chinese Super League. The rise and relative fall of the CSL over the last decade has been one of the most talked-about stories in the global game. In came stars such as Nicolas Anelka, Didier Drogba and Carlos Tevez. Attendances rose and so did standards; Guangzhou Evergrande became the first Chinese team to win Asia's Champions League in 2013 under Marcello Lippi and did it again two years later, led by Luiz Felipe Scolari.

Soon after the second triumph, authorities grew concerned at the amount of money leaving the country – always a sensitive issue in China – and installed brakes on all the spending. Then the domestic property market stalled – a big problem given that most CSL clubs were owned by real estate companies. This situation was worsened by the global pandemic that produced the world's longest and strictest lockdown.

When Nanjing took on Suzhou on July 5, there were over 60,000 present and, according to reports, over 800,000 visited the ticketing website

Passionate...a Suzhou fan roars on his team

Clubs soon folded, including, in February 2021, Jiangsu FC, who had become the national champions just a few months earlier.

That left the affluent coastal province of Jiangsu, home to 80 million, without a professional club. It doesn't seem to matter now, as something has moved to fill the void, something unexpected and organic.

The Jiangsu City Football League, known as Suchao, kicked off earlier this year. It consists of 13 teams,

representing cities around the province who have been playing each other. These sides, made up of amateurs, students and residents from the local area, may not be of the standard of Ramires or Alex Teixeira who played for Jiangsu FC but they are much more relatable.

The populace have got behind their teams to an impressive extent. When Nanjing, from the provincial capital, took on the province's biggest city Suzhou on July 5, there were over 60,000 present and, according to reports, over 800,000 visited the ticketing website. The next night, 30,000 flocked to nearby Zhenjiang.

This league has been integrated into the province's urban culture, with cities and clubs working closely together – buy a ticket to go to see Nanjing and it came with a chance to take a boat trip around the former national capital, while others offered restaurant tables offering local delicacies.

It also helps that ticket prices were low and that, unlike many CSL games in a huge country, distances for away fans were convenient. And then there is the social media. It has helped the success; indeed, some say it has been the main driving force.

It has all come naturally and it is spreading. Other provinces have also started leagues of their own. Hunan, Jiangxi, Sichuan and Wuhan have all been trying to capture some of that Jiangsu magic and the starts have been encouraging.

Now the question is whether the popularity will be sustained and, if so, how it will connect with the rest of the game in the Middle Kingdom. There are also concerns that it will become so big that there will be regulations and that this will kill off the energy that makes it so special.

But whatever happens elsewhere, the Jiangsu City Football League has shown, or reminded, that there is a love of football in China. It has not come from governments, big business or anything else but just people with pride in their cities, enjoying supporting their local teams against nearby rivals.

John Duerden

OFC Pro League

Oceania finally establishes its first professional football league

Auckland FC...the New Zealanders will be one of the eight teams taking part in the inaugural OFC Professional League

Six years after the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) first mooted the idea of a professional league for the region, the plans are close to becoming a reality.

"This is a historic moment for Oceania football," said OFC general secretary Franck Castillo in confirming the plans. "For the first time, our region will have a professional league that provides a pathway for players, coaches, and clubs to compete at the highest level within the Pacific."

Eight teams from seven countries have been chosen to take part, with the participating clubs a mixture of existing names from the region and new sides.

Solomon Kings will take part as part of a joint venture between the Solomon Islands Football Federation and Australian semi-professional outfit Wynnum Wolves, who play in the Queensland Premier League. The new club will be based in Honiara and Carmichael Park in Wynnum, a suburb of Brisbane.

Two clubs from Fiji – one in Ba and another in Suva – initially expressed interest in taking part. But after submissions by the Fiji Football Association (FFA) to the Ministry of Youth and Sports for support, a new club named the Bula Boys will be formed. The club will have FFA backing but operate independently, similar to the Drua rugby union franchise.

Vanuatu FC have been rebranded as Vanuatu United with a new nickname, The Chiefs, as part of an attempt led by general manager Christian Happel to produce a side that will attract interest from across the Pacific Island. "Chiefs are symbols of leadership, respect, and responsibility – values that we aim to instill in our team and in the way we represent Vanuatu," Happel said.

There was interest from four clubs in Papua New Guinea, but Bougainville, Port Moresby and Lae City dropped out of the running leaving Hekari United – OFC Champions League winners in 2010 – as the PNG's only representatives.

In Tahiti, a professional club was formed by existing local side AS Venus, the 11-time champions of the French territory's national league, from Mahina. After receiving endorsement by the Tahitian Football Federation and the local government, the club saw off bids from AS Pirae and AS Tefana.

Two clubs under the auspices of the Asian Football Confederation will also compete: South Melbourne and Auckland FC.

Founded by Greek immigrants in 1959, South Melbourne play in the National Premier League Victoria, and recently joined the newly launched second-tier Australian Championship. The club will host its games at the 12,000-capacity Lakeside Stadium.

Although New Zealand is part of the OFC, Auckland FC compete in Australia's A-League and are part of the Black Knight multi-club ownership group that also features Premier League outfit Bournemouth.

A second Kiwi side, Christchurch United, also got the nod. The club plays in the Dettol Southern League, one of three regional leagues in New Zealand, which does fall under the auspices of the OFC. Christchurch United is backed by Russian businessman Viatcheslav "Slava" Meyn, who moved to the city in 2009.

Another Kiwi team, Wellington Phoenix, were among 13 sides out of 24 applicants to pass the initial club licensing phase but missed the cut for the new league, which will start on January 10, 2026, and run to May 2026. The winner will qualify for the 2029 edition of the Club World Cup.

Steve Menary

FAI Cup

The Irish Cup has had its fair share of fairy tales this season, with the final still to come

The 2025 FAI Cup semi-finals were supposed to deliver the ultimate underdog story. Founded just three years ago, Kerry FC are the League of Ireland's newest outfit and had captured hearts across the country with a cup run that defied all logic.

Part-time players, led by top scorer and record appearance-maker Sean McGrath – who spends his days labouring for the council with his uncle – had already seen off top-flight Sligo Rovers in a sensational quarter-final, coming from 3-0 down to win 4-3. With manager Colin Healy, a two-time FAI Cup winner in his playing days, the ingredients were all there.

But the reality check came swiftly at Tallaght Stadium. Shamrock Rovers, ruthless and clinical as they have been for much of the season, dispatched Kerry 6-1. Graham Burke scored twice, teen sensation Michael Noonan added another brace, and lofty dreams of the greatest upset in Irish Cup history evaporated long before the final whistle was blown.

The 1,000 travelling supporters from Kerry made the journey north with hope; they returned with pride in a remarkable season, but no silverware to show for it.

First Division Kerry's story remains extraordinary. In only their third year in the League of Ireland, competing in the second tier without the luxury of full-time professionalism that their Premier Division counterparts enjoy, they reached the last four of the country's most prestigious knockout competition in a remarkable fashion.

In their first game, they beat Athlone Town 2-1 after extra-time following a 97th-minute equaliser. Next, they won 2-0 against promotion-chasing Cobh Ramblers, who had two players sent off. That led them to that remarkable quarter-final comeback victory against Sligo Rovers, a game that featured another stoppage-time equaliser and a winner deep into extra-time.

Prior to the semis, McGrath spoke of wanting to test himself against the best, to see how far his team could go. Shamrock Rovers' riposte was clinical, but Kerry's journey feels far from over. This season has laid foundations that suggest their cup run won't be their last brush with the big time.

Dream over... Michael Noonan scores Shamrock Rovers' fifth goal against Kerry FC

Yet, as one fairy tale died at Tallaght, another stubbornly refused to follow suit at Turner's Cross where Cork City, bottom of the Premier Division and mired in a season of misery, pulled off their own semi-final shock.

Dismissed by some as no-hopers when the draw paired them with St Patrick's Athletic – cheers were reportedly heard at the Dublin side's Richmond Park home when the tie was announced – the pre-match atmosphere reflected the tensions of a troubled campaign. From Cork's Shed End came toilet rolls, tennis balls and banners of protest, demanding changes at boardroom level. Kick-off was delayed as a result.

> Cork City will take on Shamrock Rovers at the Aviva Stadium on November 9 with history beckoning

Surprise FAI Cup finalists...Cork City celebrate their semi-final victory against St Patrick's Athletic

Then Cork summoned something extraordinary. Sean Maguire's ninth-minute strike settled nerves before Evan McLaughlin's quick-fire second-half double sealed a stunning 3-0 win in front of 5,408 fans, the club's highest attendance of the season.

Victorious manager Ger Nash said afterwards that his players used the outside criticism as motivation, noting that most had expected an all-Dublin final. For a fanbase worn down by a dismal campaign, the performance by Nash's men offered a brief, glorious reprieve – though for many, the night's success is a temporary papering over of some deep cracks.

Cork will take on Shamrock Rovers at the Aviva Stadium on November 9 with history beckoning. The team from the south could become the first team in 23 years to combine top-flight relegation with FAI Cup glory, while Rovers are chasing their first league and cup double since 1987.

On paper, it's a mismatch – Rovers have walked the league this season, while Cork have stumbled toward the drop – but when have cup games ever been decided on paper?

Joseph Phelan

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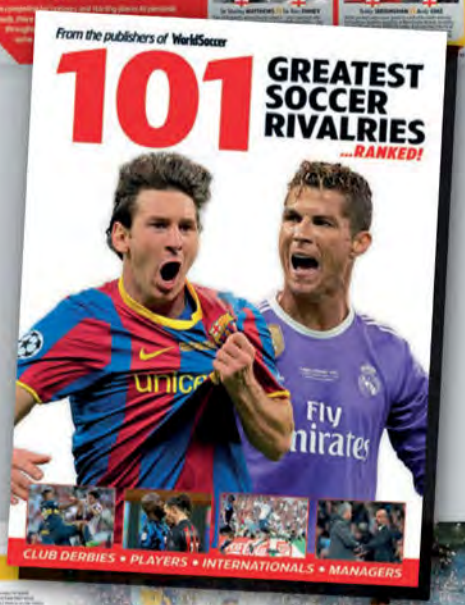

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eye witness

Tom Kundert reports

PORTUGAL

Mourinho back where it all began

Benfica is by far Portugal's most popular club. The commonly reported statistic is that well over half the country are Benfica supporters, not to mention the vast majority of the Portuguese diaspora scattered around the globe. Following the fortunes of the Eagles is certainly never dull.

Despite Porto's sensational start to 2025-26 under new Italian coach Francesco Farioli, and champions Sporting continuing to look strong in their unaccustomed position as Portugal's dominant team over recent years, it is once again Benfica who stole the headlines in the opening months of the new season.

For the second successive season, club president Rui Costa sacked his coach just a few matches into the new campaign. Last year it was Roger Schmidt who was axed. The German

Back at Benfica... club president Rui Costa unveils Mourinho

coach was already unpopular after poor results in his second season in Lisbon, making it a surprise that Costa gave him the chance to start his third. A defeat and a draw in Benfica's first two away matches and Schmidt was on his way out, replaced by the returning Bruno Lage.

Twelve months on and Lage lasted only one league match longer, although this time it was results at home that proved the tipping point for Costa to pull the trigger. Lage was sacked after drawing at Estadio da Luz against Santa Clara, then letting a two-goal lead slip as Benfica fell to a shock defeat against Qarabag in the Champions League. With presidential elections just a month away, Rui Costa, already trailing in the opinion polls, needed something sensational to restore hope of re-election.

Enter the scene Jose Mourinho. Just a couple of days after the Qarabag debacle, Mourinho was sitting alongside Rui Costa at the club's Seixal training complex as he was unveiled as Benfica coach for the second time in his career. It was at Benfica, 25 years earlier practically to the day, that Mourinho took his first job as a senior head coach. Sitting just 30 kilometres from the city of his birth, Setubal, where he used to help out his father, Felix Mourinho, who was coach of the local team and where he has a street named after him, this was the very definition of a homecoming.

Even given the enormity of his achievements and his industrial levels of self-confidence, the completing of the circle clearly touched

Sacked...Bruno Lage's final game came in defeat to Qarabag

"Thanks to the experience I have acquired in football, I think I am able to control my emotions better now"

Mourinho during his first press conference back at the club

Mourinho at an emotional level. "Thanks to the experience I have acquired in football, I think I am able to control my emotions better now," he began, when asked how it felt to be returning to his home country, but his demeanour suggested otherwise. It was jarring to see the 62-year-old uncharacteristically hesitant, even somewhat nervous at the start of the press conference.

More so given that in his brilliant career, one of Mourinho's undisputable qualities has been his mastery of the media, elevating the whole concept of interaction with the press to a level never previously seen in football. And he loosened up soon enough during the long round of questions.

"It's been 25 years, but I haven't come here to celebrate my career. I'm going to immerse myself in this mission," he said, adding that he would literally be sleeping at Benfica Campus in Seixal the next few days. "I would like to say to you, Rui Costa, as the representative of the *Benfiquistas* all around the world, that none of the other giant clubs that I have had the opportunity to coach has made me feel so honoured, with such a sense of responsibility, so motivated, as I am as the coach of Benfica. Coaching Benfica is returning to my level, given that my level is to coach the biggest clubs in the world."

At face value it appears a perfect storm: a president desperate to show he can hire the right people

Comeback...Mourinho at AVS ahead of his first game back in charge of Benfica

Then and now... Mourinho during his first spell at Benfica back in 2000 and on his return

to bring the glory days back to Benfica and the best manager in the history of Portuguese football, uniting with the shared goal of restoring their flagging reputations.

Benfica's schedule, however, made it difficult for the new setup to get off to a flying start. Two wins and draw in Mourinho's first three matches back in Portuguese dugouts was reasonable in terms of results, if not performances. But a daunting four-game away run followed, including trips to two of Mourinho's former clubs, Chelsea in the Champions League and Porto for *O Classico*, followed by another European away day against an improving Newcastle United.

> "It is undeniable that Mourinho's return to Portugal represents an opportunity for the league itself. The eyes of the world are now fixed on the Estadio da Luz"
>
> **Portuguese football journalist Luis Cristovao**

It has often been when Mourinho's teams are unfancied that they show their best attributes, and the coach was happy with how Benfica competed in a narrow defeat at Stamford Bridge. That was followed up by a gritty goalless draw at Porto, the Eagles becoming the first team to check the Dragons' impressive march of nine victories from nine games. The result left Benfica in third place, four points behind the leaders, going into the October international break.

As ever, much of the focus on those two matches centred on Mourinho rather than his team. A few days before he was appointed coach of Benfica, the Porto president and former assistant of Mourinho's, Andre Villas-Boas, had welcomed the then-unemployed coach to the Estadio do Dragao, where he received a standing ovation from the capacity crowd. His "welcome" was very different when he returned a fortnight afterwards as the coach of the northern club's bitterest of rivals, with insults and objects raining down on Mourinho throughout the 90 minutes.

Asked post-match whether he was surprised at the behaviour of the fans given he had orchestrated two of the best years in the club's history,

Unwelcome return ...Mourinho collects some of the rubbish thrown down at him by fans in Porto

Hostile reception...Porto fans greet Mourinho on Benfica's arrival at the Estadio do Dragao

History...memories of Mourinho's success at Chelsea overhung his press conference

Stamford Bridge return...Mourinho acknowledges the Chelsea supporters

Mourinho was commendably sanguine: "My gratitude towards Porto hasn't changed one bit. I don't know if Porto fans' gratitude towards me has changed, but mine towards Porto as a club hasn't changed."

The answer was indicative of a seemingly calmer and less belligerent version of Mourinho. He has been at his most amiable in his dealings with the press, even when facing some uncomfortable questions, and the media in general have treated him with deference. Indeed, much of the focus has been on how Mourinho's return is a boon for Portuguese football itself, drawing eyes towards it and increasing interest in the league.

"It is undeniable that Mourinho's return to Portugal represents an opportunity for the league itself. The eyes of the world are now fixed on the Estadio da Luz, following every step of a soap opera that Mourinho will decide how to script," wrote renowned football journalist Luis Cristovao, who also noted a different mindset to the cocksure coach who swept all before him, trampling on anyone in his way as Porto coach. "Mourinho has returned as an experienced, mature figure, more teacher than actor, more thinker than provocateur. He is comfortable in this space."

Given his career path, his achievements and his inimitable personality, Mourinho will always be the subject of intense curiosity, but the more immediate concern for Rui Costa and Benfica is the impact he will have on the Lisbon giants. Benfica have won just one championship in the last six seasons, and the early signs are not overly encouraging as regards their Primeira Liga prospects this year.

He may not spit fire in the same way he used to, but no one should doubt Mourinho's desire to achieve success burns as brightly as ever. However the story ends, another gripping chapter in Benfica's history is about to be written.

THE LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

It has been slim pickings for both Benfica and Mourinho over the past eight seasons. Curiously, the 2017-18 season represents a sharp downwards turning point for both club and manager in terms of the silverware they would have expected to accumulate.

Benfica's return of just two league titles and one out of a possible 16 domestic cups is a particularly poor return, especially in the wake of a four-year period of dominance in Portugal when the club mopped up four straight league titles, five domestic cups and made a Europa League final appearance.

Mourinho's decline is even starker. Since winning the Europa League and the League Cup in 2016-17 with Manchester United, the only trophy the Portuguese manager has lifted at four different clubs is the Conference League with Roma in 2021-22. Mourinho last won a league title over a decade ago, at Chelsea.

Trophy hauls

Benfica

2013-2018	POST-2019
4x league titles	*2x league titles*
2x Portuguese Cups	*1x Portuguese League Cup*
3x Portuguese League Cups	

Portuguese League

Portuguese Cup

Portuguese League Cup

Mourinho

2013-2018	POST-2019
1x league title (Chelsea)	*1x Conference League (Roma)*
2x League Cups (Chelsea/Manchester United)	
1x Europa League (Manchester United)	

Premier League

League Cup

Europa League

Conference League

eyewitness

Alec McQuarrie reports

CYPRUS

Pafos FC's Champions League debut

If you told anyone in 2013 that within 12 years Pafos FC would be competing in the UEFA Champions League, you would get some very odd looks. This is because, until 11 years ago, Pafos FC did not technically exist.

Even skipping ahead to the scorching summer of 2025 – when supporters were basking in the club's first league title triumph – battling the likes of Bayern Munich, Chelsea and Juventus in the cooler months seemed a preposterous possibility.

League phase qualification proved a step too far for Scottish powerhouses Celtic and Rangers. Former European Cup winners Feyenoord and Red Star Belgrade could not manage it either. Even Jose Mourinho's Fenerbahce fell at the final hurdle. But not Pafos, a team from a sleepy Cypriot seaside resort famed for being the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite. The town's entire population could fit inside Stamford Bridge and there

Champions League history ...Pafos fans ahead of their clash with Bayern Munich
Photo credit: Pafos FC

would still be a few thousand empty seats. Their 28-player squad is valued by data website *Transfermarkt.com* as approximate to one Trevoh Chalobah. No one expected Pafos to reach the Champions League proper at their first attempt. Even the club's staff did not dare speak about it during their scarcely comprehensible qualification campaign.

"Nobody said we need to make it into the league phase, nobody," says Chris Matheou, head of media and communications at Pafos FC. "At the same time, secretly, we believed we could do it. But we weren't taking ourselves too seriously. We were saying: 'Okay guys, it's a privilege to be here,

Pafos chairman ...Roman Dubov celebrates Champions League qualification with his players
Photo credit: Pafos FC

let's do our best.' So there was no pressure. And I think that's why we did it."

The islanders went undefeated in their six qualifying ties against Maccabi Tel Aviv, Dynamo Kyiv and Red Star Belgrade. But it took something spectacular from tricky Brazilian winger Jaja to preserve their invincible record and slingshot the club from relative obscurity to main draw immortality.

After Pafos had stunned the Serbian champions 2-1 in Belgrade in the play-off first leg, Mirko Ivanic levelled the tie in Cyprus with half an hour remaining. Then, in the 89th minute, Portuguese playmaker Pepe swung in a low free-kick from deep, met by Jaja who sent a looping volley over everyone and into the far top corner. It was a jaw-dropping finish, quite literally in the case of Red Star goalkeeper Matheus, who could only pivot to gaze in disbelief as the ball arced into his net.

Debutants...Pafos line up ahead of their first-ever Champions League match

Historic...the moment Pafos FC's name was drawn out of the hat in the Champions League draw

This was how it came to pass that Bayern Munich would visit Cyprus at the end of September. But how the hosts came into existence is a different story altogether. A product of four local clubs, Pafos FC resemble a Russian doll in more ways than one, given that their chairman is ex-Portsmouth president Roman Dubov.

They trace their origins back to APOP Paphos and Evagoras Paphos, the latter formed in the aftermath of Cypriot independence from Great Britain. Evagoras took their name from 19-year-old Evagoras Pallikarides, a local EOKA guerrilla soldier who was both the youngest and last Cypriot freedom fighter to be hanged by the British. His face adorned the club's badge for 39 years until the two sides merged to form AEP Paphos in 2000. AEP likewise honoured Pallikarides and, when the financially stricken side merged with yet another club, AE Kouklion, in 2014, Pafos FC kept his likeness front and centre in their emblem.

> "Nobody said we need to make it into the league phase, nobody. At the same time, secretly, we believed we could do it"
>
> **Pafos FC's head of media and communications Chris Matheou**

Up until this point, the various incarnations of Pafos had always struggled to maintain a foothold in Cyprus' top flight, but this was all about to change. The takeover by the Dubov-led Total Sports Investments in 2017 not only brought significant upgrades to the club's creaking offices, academy and training centre, but also offered an opportunity for a break from the past. But Dubov had other ideas. Instead of the national hero being wiped clean from the badge, Pallikarides became its defining feature.

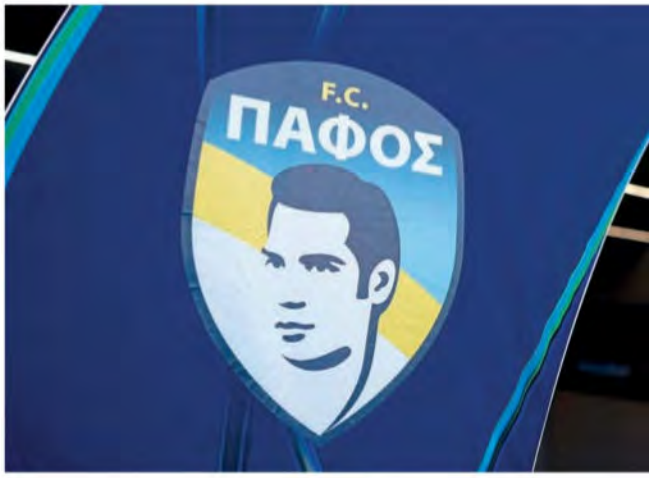
"One of the first things I told Roman when I joined was that having Evagoras on the logo has limitations commercially – it's a sad story, there's politics involved, and the club is not political, which is weird for Cyprus," explains Matheou. "He said: 'I don't care, because this is what makes the people of Pafos care about this club. As long as they care, and they come to the stadium and they support the team, that's the most important thing.'"

And Dubov arrived just in time. Despite the merger, Pafos were still desperately fighting to keep their head above water.

"We didn't have any other plan," remembers Pafos supporter Polimnios Michaelides. "It was either the Russians or nothing, no team. They showed us a plan: 'We will do this this year, we will do this the next year.' Nobody believed it. They said that after seven years we would be champions and get into the Champions League. Are you crazy? Nobody would tell you that they ever imagined one day we would take the championship. No one."

Supporters had to watch with envy as Aris Limassol, another Cypriot club boosted by foreign investment, came from nowhere to claim the 2022-23 league title the season after being taken over. By contrast, Pafos saw success arrive in stages. After steadily climbing the table year-on-year, they captured their first piece of silverware in 2024, winning the Cypriot Cup with a 3-0 final trouncing of Omonia. This earned Pafos a debut in UEFA competitions, and a remarkable run to the 2024-25 Conference League round of 16 saw Omonia defeated yet again in what was dubbed the "Cypriot Civil War".

More importantly though, a 4-0 thrashing of runners-up Aris sealed Pafos' maiden league title with two games to spare, as they became



Evagoras Pallikarides... the soldier's face symbolically adorns the Pafos badge

The boss...Pafos head coach Juan Carlos Carcedo reacts after the 0-0 draw with Olympiacos

Cyprus' fifth different champion in five seasons.

"Long gone are the days where APOEL were dominating and Omonia were dominating," says Cypriot football expert Stel Stylianou from the *This is Mappa* podcast. "Those days seem to be numbered. They might come back with Pafos, because they've got the potential to be dominant. But I think the other teams have now realised you can't sit on your hands. You need to be smart about how you spend money, where you spend money."

Pafos are spending their Champions League windfall sensibly. In fact, the club hardly recruited at all over the summer, instead planning a new state-of-the-art stadium ("the best in Cyprus," Matheou assures *World Soccer*) at the site of their existing ground, the Stelios Kyriakides Stadium, which currently cannot host UEFA league stage matches.

But one player they did recruit was former Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Arsenal centre-back David Luiz.

"He's been amazing," says Matheou. "He's so approachable. He's a very down-to-earth person, which for me was shocking because he's this global superstar. But since he's joined the club, it's like he made it his life's mission to help us in any area possible, on the pitch, off the pitch, advise the players, speak to them, but also help the club grow in the media."

Unfortunately, the 38-year-old was forced off injured on Pafos' Champions League debut, a trip to face Greek title-holders Olympiacos. It was a nightmare first half for the Cypriots,

High-profile arrival...David Luiz has plenty of European experience

First Champions League home clash...Pafos FC players line up for a team photo ahead of September's league phase showdown against Bayern Munich

who also saw defender Bruno sent off for two early cautions. But the ten-man visitors held out heroically for 65 minutes to earn a 0-0 draw, an unsurprising result given that Pafos have one of the most miserly defences on the continent – only Slavia Prague conceded fewer than Pafos' 21 league goals in Europe's top 20 leagues last season.

But a much bigger test was coming up next – the visit of Bayern Munich to the Alphamega stadium in Limassol. The six-time European champions were not taking Pafos lightly: Harry Kane, Luis Diaz, Michael Olise and Joshua Kimmich all started as the Bavarians fielded pretty much their first-choice starting line-up.

A banner draped across the south stand read, in Ancient Greek: "Not how many but where," a Spartan pre-war proverb indicating that the size of the army they faced mattered less than where the battlefield would be.

"We don't care who we play against," says Matheou. "If it's Bayern Munich, we might concede seven or eight goals, but we'll just go there, be ourselves, do our best, and why not?"

> "Long gone are the days where APOEL and Omonia were dominating…they might come back with Pafos, because they've got the potential to be dominant"
>
> **Stel Stylianou, *This is Mappa* podcast**

As it turned out, Bayern were 4-0 up after just 34 minutes. Even the Spartans might have started to ask themselves: "How many?"

In truth, this was not Pafos' battle. Their European future will be decided on other days. But, on the stroke of half-time, they got their moment, a first goal in the Champions League and a strike that would make Aphrodite blush. Mislav Orsic, formerly of Dinamo Zagreb and Southampton, intercepted a slack pass from Kim Min-jae, took aim, and unleashed a swerving rocket right into the top corner. Manuel Neuer was rooted to the spot and the Alphamega stadium erupted in stunned elation.

In a much more competitive second period, the Cypriots limited the visitors to a single Olise goal and the biggest match in the club's fledgling history ended 5-1. The result did not stop Luiz and Co. receiving a standing ovation as they left the field. From nought to Europe's elite in 11 years – Pafos are well ahead of schedule.

Landmark goal ...Mislav Orsic celebrates scoring against Bayern

eye witness

Neel Shelat reports

MOROCCO

Morocco's emergence as an international football hub

Chants of "*Dima Maghreb*" (Morocco Forever) were one of the defining sounds of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. While most people around the world remember the tournament for Argentina and Lionel Messi's unforgettable triumph, those in the Arab world are quick to bring up Morocco's historic run to the semi-finals. The Atlas Lions became the first Arab (and African) nation to make it to the final four, knocking out European giants Portugal and Spain along the way.

The rise of Morocco might have gone a little under the radar on the global stage, with the spotlight often shone on their compatriots in the Middle East. Either way, the 2020s should certainly go down as the decade when the Arab world made its mark on the global football stage.

The future...a rendered image of Morocco's Stade Hassan II Stadium, due to open in 2028

Record crowd... scenes during the 2022 WAFCON final in Rabat

The region has never been short of passionate fans, but they are now getting major events on their doorstep with regularity. As well as Qatar's staging of the World Cup, the massively increased investment in the Saudi Pro League has attracted worldwide attention. The two countries have also hosted almost every major AFC men's event conceivable in recent times; Saudi Arabia secured the rights for the centralised knockouts of the newly reformed AFC Champions League Elite for multiple seasons, while Qatar hosted, and won, the most recent Asian Cup. In the October international break, they both hosted the fourth round of Asian World Cup qualifying as well, handing their teams home advantage at a crucial point on the road to North America. The willingness to put themselves at the centre of AFC events is clear, as are the benefits.

Meanwhile, over in the Maghreb – the westernmost region of the Arab world – Morocco are establishing a similar stature in Africa.

Prior to the start of the decade, the kingdom had only ever hosted one major international football tournament: the 1988 Africa Cup of Nations. Even in that instance they were third choice; original hosts Zambia withdrew due to financial issues, and replacements Algeria were stripped of the honour after a dispute CAF.

The kingdom next won hosting rights for AFCON 2015, but were forced to withdraw from the competition with just a couple of months to spare due to the Ebola epidemic in Western Africa.

That was one of the first major decisions taken under the reign of Fouzi Lekjaa, who had become president of the Royal Moroccan Football Federation in the spring of 2014. He has been in post ever since, reforming the domestic scene before turning his attention to the international game. His influence has grown beyond Morocco, becoming a member of FIFA Council in 2021 and being elected CAF first vice-president in April of this year.

With Lekjaa's influence, Morocco was in prime position to step up when, in 2022, Guinea was stripped of the hosting rights for AFCON 2025. In September 2023, it was confirmed that the kingdom would host the AFCON finals again.

That is not all, though. They also

Rebuilt...the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium re-opened in September

have half an eye on 2030, when they will co-host the centennial edition of the World Cup, bringing the tournament to North Africa for the very first time. They have grand designs for the finals, most notably the 115,000-capacity Hassan II Stadium in Casablanca, but not everyone is onboard. In October, there were violent protests against the spending plans, as protesters asked: "Stadiums are here, but where are the hospitals?"

In the more immediate term, AFCON 2025 will take place between December 21 and January 18. While obviously a major tournament in its own right, it is also being seen as something of a dry run for the World Cup, with some of the country's premier stadiums set to re-open following renovation. Venues that will host games at AFCON – and likely the World Cup too – include the Marrakesh Stadium, the near-70,000 capacity Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat and the 75,000-seater Ibn Batouta Stadium in Tangier.

Besides increasing the country's soft power footprint by staging such major competitions, the government has taken the opportunity to accelerate modernisation and infrastructure development in many parts of the country. Significant construction and redevelopment projects can be spotted all over major cities such as the capital Rabat, the largest city Casablanca, the former capital Marrakesh, and the northern port city of Tangier. The country's high-speed rail network, which tops the speed charts in Africa and is up there with the world's quickest, is also being expanded to improve connectivity between the western city of Marrakesh and the more northern belt that includes Casablanca and Rabat.

Beyond these two tournaments, there is a lot of other international football that has been and will be played in the kingdom. In a confederation where various teams are unable to play at their home due to financial challenges, political issues or conflicts, Morocco's wealth of infrastructure has offered a temporary base to many. Six nations – Comoros, Gambia, Lesotho, Niger, Central African Republic and Madagascar – played nominal home matches in the country in the most recent AFCON qualification, while the likes of Mali, Burkina Faso, Sao Tome & Principe, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Djibouti, Somalia, Congo, Guinea, Ethiopia, Chad and Seychelles have done similar for the ongoing World Cup qualifiers.

And it is not only men's football that is being held in Morocco. Although the women's national team do not have much historic pedigree – they only made their debut in 1998 and after WAFCON 2000 did not appear at any major tournament for two decades – they hosted the WAFCON for the first time in 2022.

While there are undoubtedly some cultural challenges that have hindered the growth of the women's game in the country, the federation dramatically increased investment in infrastructure and development in the years leading up to the tournament. The stated ambition was to have 90,000 registered players by 2024. As well as state-of-the-art facilities, the country also boasts two fully professional tiers of women's football.

The return on that investment was near instant. WAFCON attendance records were smashed as the hosts made a shock run all the way to the final, where they faced South Africa. *Banyana Banyana* had never lifted the trophy before either, but were the much more experienced side and ultimately won 2-1. Despite the result, the tournament was a resounding success for the Atlas Lionesses, who had emphatically announced their arrival not just to the home fans but also to opponents all around the world. Their success secured one of Africa's four spots at the following year's global finals, where they made more history by becoming the first Arab nation in history to reach the knockout rounds of the Women's World Cup on their tournament debut. Like their male counterparts in Qatar 2022, it was a landmark achievement.

They have grand designs for the 2030 World Cup, most notably the 115,000-capacity Hassan II Stadium in Casablanca

The Atlas Lionesses soon got the chance to go a step further, as Morocco hosted WAFCON once again this year. Scheduling challenges meant that the tournament was played a year later than planned and, with renovation work already underway in preparation for the men's AFCON, it had to be held on a smaller scale. The rebuilt Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium was not ready in time to host the final, so the smaller Olympic Annex Stadium that lies in its shadow took over instead. Nevertheless, the Atlas Lionesses got a great deal of support as they reached a second successive final, this time falling even more agonisingly short by blowing a two-goal lead in the final against record champions Nigeria.

In 2026, a third consecutive edition of the WAFCON will be held in Morocco, just a couple of months after the men's tournament. Additionally, the next five editions of the Under-17 Women's World Cup will also be staged here – starting with the 2025 edition, which takes place from October 17 to November 8 – as the country continues to establish itself as one of the real hubs of international football of all kinds.

The arrangement is not without its critics. Aside from questions around the fairness of allowing one side to repeatedly play on home soil, there are off-field issues too. While attendances at this year's WAFCON were good for Morocco's games, those that didn't involve the hosts were much smaller. The reality is that travelling to the northern tip of Africa is simply not feasible for many fans on the continent, and that is unlikely to change by next year.

Yet Morocco is the only African country that seems willing to put their hands up and offer to host WAFCON. In a continent where tournaments have repeatedly been rescheduled, often with little notice, the country's ability to bail CAF out of difficult spots has made it an important and influential ally for the federation. Until other nations can find the means or the inclination to provide an alternative, Morocco's status as the go-to host for African events is unlikely to change.

WAFCON final...hosts Morocco narrowly lost to Nigeria this summer

Influential... Fouzi Lekjaa

Ex-Frankfurt goal machines...Hugo Ekitike celebrates a goal with Omar Marmoush

STRIKER FACTORY

How Eintracht Frankfurt's ability to develop goalscorers took them to the upper echelons of German football

Words: Nick Bidwell

Befitting a club located in Germany's financial capital, Eintracht Frankfurt have developed in the last few years into wheelers and dealers par excellence, their ever-growing competitiveness stemming from a straightforward formula: buy low, sell high.

Of course, that is the basic ambition of almost every club. But Eintracht have proven particularly adept at recruiting inexpensively to fill the gaps, cashing in, and then developing the next batch of highly-marketable young stars. And the cycle goes on.

Eintracht's main players in this strategy – CEO Axel Hellmann, their widely-lauded group of talent-spotters and especially their much-celebrated director of sport Markus Krosche – know full well that this is a game of risk and reward, where much could go wrong. But with everyone on the same page, the strategy continues to work perfectly: profits from player sales never seem to stop rolling in and good quality replacements are always on hand to maintain the momentum.

It should not be forgotten how far Eintracht have come in recent times. Almost relegated from the Bundesliga in 2016, surviving by the skin of their teeth in an end-of-season play-off against Nuremberg, they have been painstakingly rebuilt since. Just two years later they claimed the German Cup, followed by the Europa League in 2021-22 – their first European crown since lifting the UEFA Cup in 1980. Meanwhile, their league standing has also continued to improve up to last term's third-place in the Bundesliga, the first time they had qualified for the Champions League via their German championship standing.

This ascent of the mountain would simply not have been possible without their excellent work in the transfer market. In the absence of Bayern Munich's major corporate sponsors or the big business parent companies at RB Leipzig and Leverkusen, Eintracht had to look elsewhere for their capital injections and that essentially means doing all they can to boost the value of the squad and transfer income.

Mission accomplished so far. Since Krosche took over from Fredi Bobic as director of sport in 2021, the total value of the squad has gone from some €73 million to €355m, while the amount of transfer profit has exploded too. Over the past six seasons, the Eagles have spent some €292m on new signings, while receiving €469m in sales.

No other club in Germany has accumulated such a financial surplus in the same period and the lion's share of the profits has originated from the sale of strikers: Luka Jovic and Sebastien Haller to Real Madrid and West Ham respectively in the summer of 2019; Andre Silva heading to RB Leipzig in 2021, Randal Kolo Muani taking the Paris Saint-Germain train in 2023 and Omar Marmoush and Hugo Ekitike joining Manchester City and Liverpool respectively this year. This Golden Six netted the club €345m in net profit.

That they have consistently raised the bar while losing so many key players for big bucks speaks volumes for the excellence of their scouting network, the superior coaching at the club, the tremendous facilities and the vision they are able to offer a would-be recruit: use Frankfurt as a springboard to a move to a truly elite outfit.

Eintracht are not always at the head of the queue for certain players, but when they do identify someone who fits their blueprint – under 25 years old, talented yet undervalued, and with a point to prove – they get straight down to business.

Another important point to note is the absence in player contracts here of release clauses. Although buyers are aware that Eintracht have to sell to keep the plates spinning, they still have to come to the negotiating table and Krosche is renowned for driving a hard bargain, especially unwilling to compromise on valuation.

Hugo EKITIKE (2024-2025)

On the face of it, Eintracht made an absolute killing when selling the talented France forward to Liverpool this summer for a whopping €92m including performance-related add-ons. After all, they only paid PSG €20m for Ekitike (an initial €3.5m loan fee and an additional €16.5m to make it permanent). But let's not forget the other numbers involved. With PSG due 20% of the Liverpool outlay via a sell-on clause, plus agent fees, a good €20m of the windfall immediately disappeared into thin air.

Nevertheless, €50m is not to be sniffed at and Eintracht certainly deserve full credit for the way they brought the best out of Ekitike in his 18 months at the Deutsche Bank Park. Merely bench fodder during his time in Paris, the former Reims forward needed to feel wanted again and Eintracht did a wonderful job of restoring his confidence. Within a couple of months of moving to Frankfurt early in 2024, he was firing on all cylinders at the point of attack. Last season he shone constantly, first in a front two alongside Omar Marmoush and then as a lone wolf following the latter's mid-term move to Manchester City. Not only did Ekitike supply 22 goals and 12 assists in all competitions, he also hit all the right notes with high-tempo style, dribbling ability and selflessness.

Frustrated...Ekitike scored four goals in 33 games for PSG

Eintracht would not have qualified for this season's Champions League without his Herculean efforts.

Liverpool's mega-money swoop for Ekitike was exactly what Eintracht director of sport Krosche was referring to when he declared in an interview with *Sky* that the Eagles were "a club in between", the archetypal medium-sized outfit, which knows its place in the food chain and does not look to buck the market. "Selling players is part of my job. I'm not emotional about it. It's just business. We are a club in between, who sell to the elite sides." It's a philosophy that attracts the right sort of talent: ambitious, talented, hungry. Players know that Frankfurt is a launch pad and in return the club gets commitment, value and proper resale potential.

Eintracht, were, of course, sorry to see Ekitike depart. Yet life goes on, as does the balancing act they seek to maintain between opportunity and survival. They see the reinvestment of the Merseyside big bucks as the cornerstone of a brighter tomorrow and as chief executive Hellmann pointed out in an interview last season with *Sky Germany* pundit Jan Age Fjortoft, pragmatism is the only way forward for a club like Eintracht. "I would love him [Ekitike] to stay here for the next ten years. However we're all realistic. Hugo is one of the biggest prospects in Europe. He's a young man and has a tremendous future. And as we know: the market is the market."

Sporting director... Markus Krosche

SUCCESS STORIES

Luka JOVIC
(2017-2019 & 2021)

The €60m sale of the Serbia striker to Real Madrid in June 2019 was the very first example of Eintracht's flair for monetising partially-fulfilled potential. Initially recruited in 2017 on a two-year loan deal from Benfica, Jovic, still a teenager on signing, took a while to find his feet in western Germany, but really came of age in the 2018-19 season with 27 goals, including 17 in the Bundesliga and ten more in the Europa League.

Eintracht triggered a purchase option for him in April 2019, paying Benfica a reported €6m. Just three months later, Madrid splashed out ten times that amount to bring him on board.

Sadly for Jovic, it did not work out at the Bernabeu and he was back in Frankfurt for a short loan spell in the second-half of the 2020-21 season. In the recent summer window, he joined Greek side AEK Athens from Milan, having also played for Fiorentina in 2022-23.

Sebastien HALLER
(2017-2019)

Just a month after cashing in on Jovic, Eintracht pulled off another smart profiteering exercise. Haller was sold to West Ham United in a deal worth up to €50m, a record fee for the Hammers and quite a mark-up for a player who had cost the Frankfurter a mere €7m from Dutch outfit Utrecht in 2017.

In two seasons in Germany, the rangy French-born front-man hit 33 goals in all comps for Eintracht, including four en route to the German Cup triumph of 2017-18, and registered a fair number of assists too. Yet, barring one spectacular overhead kick against Crystal Palace, he made little impact in East London, and by January 2021 was offloaded to Ajax.

There, Haller would rediscover his prolific touch, racking up record-breaking numbers in the 2021-22 Champions League, before going on to claim the Africa Cup of Nations with Ivory Coast in February 2024.

This summer, Haller returned to old flame Utrecht on a permanent deal following less prolific spells with Borussia Dortmund and Leganes.

Andre SILVA
(2019-2021)

The Portuguese striker, who Eintracht acquired on a two-year loan deal from Milan in September 2019, quickly became a big favourite with the Frankfurt faithful by scoring no fewer than 40 goals for the Eagles in two glorious Bundesliga campaigns.

By the end of Silva's first season in Frankfurt, their director of sport Fredi Bobic had seen enough and moved swiftly to offer Silva a three-year contract. No details of the costs were released at the time, though it was suggested in some quarters that the deal involved a €3m fee and Frankfurt allowing Milan to convert their loan of winger Ante Rebic to a permanent transfer.

In July 2021, RB Leipzig paid €21m to sign Silva, but he failed to repeat the form that had seen him score 28 league goals in the previous season. In August of this year – following loans with Real Sociedad and Werder Bremen – he joined La Liga side Elche.

Omar MARMOUSH (2023-2025)

When Eintracht acquired the Egypt international on a free transfer from Wolfsburg in the summer of 2023, Plan A was definitely not to install him as a typical goalscoring centre-forward. The previous season with the Wolves, he only featured five times on the scoresheet and for the most part was regarded as a skilful and flexible attacker who could work magic both in wide areas and in behind a real number nine. Only as an emergency measure was he handed the chance to lead the Frankfurt line – and what a remarkable transformation ensued. Marmoush went on to deliver the goods in spectacular style, scoring 27 Bundesliga goals in just a season-and-a-half, as well as registering 16 assists.

Some of the gifts he showcased at Eintracht were absolutely natural to him, not least his dynamism, free-kick expertise, excellence in one-on-one situations and ability in the half-space. But he also had a lot of new tricks to learn, with Eintracht coach Dino Toppmoller working endlessly with him on the training ground to make him more selfish in front of goal, better attuned to playing through the middle and to improve his effectiveness in pressing duties. At Eintracht, Marmoush became a much more complete footballer, the sort of impressive all-rounder that Pep Guardiola was only too happy to spend €70m on at the start of this year.

Deadly duo... Marmoush and Ekitike each scored 15 Bundesliga goals last season

One of Eintracht's great strengths in the transfer market is choosing exactly the right moment to sell, allowing the bidding war to build. In the summer of 2024, they reportedly turned down €20m offers for Marmoush from Fulham and Nottingham Forest. Some six months later, they banked considerably more from a Manchester City side in dire need of help up front for Erling Haaland.

Randal KOLO MUANI (2022-2023)

Although the Parisian striker only stayed at Eintracht for 12 months following a free transfer from French side Nantes in the 2022-23 off-season, the Eagles certainly struck lucky with this partnership. Kolo Muani proved a huge success on the field of play, netting 23 goals in all competitions, adding 17 assists and playing a key role in the team's progression to the knockout stages of the Champions League. Just as importantly, the Frenchman's market worth soared into the stratosphere, eventually leaving for Paris Saint-Germain in a €90m deal early in the 2023-24 campaign.

Normally, Eintracht prefer an amicable parting of the ways, happy to let an individual go when, in the words of director of sport Krosche, "a player is developing quicker than the club." But this was a messy, embittered affair, with Kolo Muani choosing to force the issue by skipping training. A banner unfurled by Eintracht supporters neatly summed up the fanbase anger: "*Kohle* [German slang for money] Muani. Cash doesn't change character. It only makes it more visible."

Kolo Muani, whose last-gasp miss probably cost France victory in the 2022 World Cup final against Argentina, would subsequently struggle at PSG. But after a productive loan spell with Juventus last term, he is now looking to push on again at Tottenham Hotspur.

"We came out the winner," insisted Krosche. "We received more or less what we wanted from this sale [Eintracht were demanding €100m] and we still had super strikers like Omar Marmoush. It was a pity it came to this, but we had no alternative. We know Randal differently and know his real character. This behaviour had no influence on transfer activities."

FUTURE STARS

Jean-Matteo BAHOYA
(2024-)

Bundesliga clubs simply love to fish in the deep reservoir of talent that exists in France and the 20-year-old former Angers left-winger is just one more gem to have crossed the Rhine. A brilliant technician, superb in one-on-one duels and on the counter-attack, he can also shift seamlessly into a number ten slot.

Bahoya's greatest asset is his pace. A few months ago, during an away game at Bochum, he was clocked running at 37.16 km/h, making him the quickest player in the entire Bundesliga.

It cost Eintracht just €8m to prise him away from Angers in January 2024, and he began his second season impressively with two goals in the opening-day victory over Werder Bremen and an assist against Hoffenheim a week later. That form was reportedly enough to attract a €70m bid from a Saudi Arabian club, which was rejected by Krosche who believes that Bahoya will be worth significantly more very soon.

Can UZUN
(2024-)

The tremendously gifted teenage attacking midfielder arrived from second-division Nuremberg in an €11m deal last year. After spending his first season with Eintracht learning the top-flight ropes, Uzun is now an automatic starter, operating as the No.10 in their 4-2-3-1 system with Bahoya to his left. After just five Bundesliga games in 2025-26, he had scored five goals and set up three others, and marked his Champions League debut with a goal in the 5-1 thumping of Galatasaray.

Arsenal have been mentioned as admirers of a player that is rated so highly by his club that they are rumoured to value him at the €80m mark. He is under contract until 2029, with Eintracht adamant that he will stay until 2027 at least.

Born in Germany to Turkish parents, the dynamic 19-year-old rejected interest from the DFB to represent Turkey, making his senior international debut in March 2024.

Elye WAHI
(2025-)

On paper, Wahi appears to be the perfect example of Eintracht's recruitment model: young, talented, with unfulfilled potential and a point to prove. The 22-year-old has already had more than €80m spent on him across three moves: from Montpellier to Lens, from Lens to Marseille and then, in January, from Marseille to Eintracht.

But if any club can realise his full potential it's Eintracht, even if he remains a work in progress for now. At the time of writing, he was still waiting for his first goal for the Eagles, but his club has plenty of patience. "We have been interested in Elye Wahi for quite some time," declared Krosche in January after signing the forward. "We will give him the time he needs to adapt."

And that patience may well pay off. A slew of achievements – scoring 20 Ligue 1 goals for Montpellier as a teenager, including the 2022-23 Goal of the Season, and a match-winning performance for Lens against Arsenal in the 2023-24 Champions League – demonstrate his vast potential. Eintracht are now ready to tap into that.

TEENAGE KICKS

Ethan Nwaneri, Arsenal's youngest-ever player, is flying the flag for the club's Hale End academy. But is he ready to deliver in the Premier League?

Words: Matt Read & Jamie Evans

It is now more than 30 years since *Match Of The Day* pundit Alan Hansen uttered the immortal words: "You can't win anything with kids."

It was August 1995, and the former Liverpool and Scotland defender had just witnessed a Manchester United side featuring Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt, Gary and Phil Neville and David Beckham lose 3-1 to Aston Villa. Yet by the end of the season, Hansen was made to eat his words as "Fergie's Fledglings", as they came to be known, reclaimed the Premier League title.

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that shortly after the 30-year anniversary of that infamous phrase, records are being broken for the number of young players involved in the Premier League. In short, England's top flight is younger than it's ever been.

Last season, the average age of starting XIs in the league was 26 years and 217 days, breaking the record set in 2007-08 by three days. By early October, this season's average had dropped below 26 years old.

In part, this can be explained by the number of teenagers that are active in the league, with 24 of them making at least one appearance before the October international break. Some, like Estevao, Lucas Bergvall, Leny Yoro and Stefanos Tzimas, are expensive recruits from abroad. Others, such as Archie Gray and Tyler Dibling were high-profile domestic signings, while the likes of Josh King, Josh Acheampong and Lewis Miley are academy graduates that have broken into the first team.

None of them, though, have been Premier League players for as long as Ethan Nwaneri.

The Hale End graduate made his league debut in September 2022, aged 15 years and 181 days, breaking a host of records in the process. He was not only the youngest player in Arsenal's history, nor just the youngest-ever Premier League player, he also broke a 58-year record previously held by ex-Sunderland goalkeeper Derek Forster as the youngest footballer in English top-flight history. Just to make Gunners fans feel even older, he is also the first player born after the building of the Emirates Stadium to represent them.

Three years on, having just signed a new contract keeping him at the club until 2030, he is reflecting on his first season as a first-team regular.

"It was good," Nwaneri says of the 2024-25 campaign, in which he played 37 games and scored nine goals in all competitions. "Obviously I wanted more, like always. I was aiming for ten goals but I was close to it. I think it was a good first season.

"Before each season, I can see where I'm going to be at the end of the season. I've always had that ability to see and visualise where I want to be and put my mind towards it. I wasn't really surprised [at his progress]. Now it's just what's the next step and what do I need to do to get to where I want to be?"

In the past, Nwaneri's early career figures might be considered prodigious. But these days, such beginnings are becoming if not the norm then certainly far more common. Lamine Yamal was born four months after the Arsenal starlet and is already a Ballon d'Or runner-up; Estevao is a month younger than Nwaneri and has seven caps for Brazil, while 17-year-old Rio Ngumoha has contributed to dramatic late wins for Liverpool against Newcastle United and Burnley this season. Closer to home, Myles Lewis-Skelly, Nwaneri's long-term friend and academy team-mate, is already a well-established first-team player and England international, while Max Dowman may well be a first-team rival soon after he became the second 15-year-old to play for Arsenal.

None of this is to say that Nwaneri is underperforming, but simply that the bar has been raised for young footballers. In the modern game, age is no barrier to a player's first-team credentials. A player with the elite education of a top-class academy combined with the fearlessness of youth is an attractive option for managers.

Nwaneri may have only been allowed to get changed in the same dressing room as his team-mates since March when he turned 18, but he already feels at home. And he's certainly not fazed by the extra pressure or attention that playing for a big club like Arsenal brings.

"It's been fine, honestly," he says of adapting to the first team. "It's part of becoming a man, I think. You have to deal with whatever comes your way, whether it's good or bad.

"One thing I realised is that they [his team-mates] have all been where we've been. We've all been kids," he

Arsenal
Emirates
FLY BETTER

adds. "These guys are so good at understanding all that and they make it really comfortable. So it's been fine, it's been good."

It has been a relatively slow start to the current campaign in terms of opportunities for Nwaneri, whose only start in the first couple of months came in a League Cup tie away to Port Vale.

But there are two factors that should open up more game time: firstly his versatility, and secondly the continued injury problems of senior players like Martin Odegaard, Bukayo Saka and Noni Madueke.

"You can see sometimes I'm a natural midfielder," he says when asked what his best position is, "but I think if the manager wants you to play in a position, you have to do it to the best of your abilities. I don't mind playing on the right...I've played false nine before – quite a few times, actually. I think I can do a role anywhere that the manager needs me.

"I want to play forward. I want to be a positive player. One that affects the game, that can control the game, that scores goals. That's just the way I play."

It was while playing on the right that he enjoyed the highlight of his young Arsenal career, cutting inside and curling a crisp finish past Manchester City goalkeeper Stefan Ortega during the Gunners' 5-1 thrashing of Pep Guardiola's side last season. It is a finish that he has honed over years of practice.

"I've always played more on the right, so I've always kind of been cutting in on my left foot, so I've just developed over the years," he says with a shrug. "I knew I'd do something if I got the ball. Then Dec[Ian Rice] luckily saw me. You don't really think, you just do it. You think about it afterwards."

It is a rare admission of confidence from a humble young player who is still finding his way in the game. Even Omari Hutchinson, a friend, former Arsenal academy graduate and an England Under-21 team-mate during the summer, has told him that he needs to "believe that he's the guy" more often.

"I just want to play. Whatever comes will come. I think that's the best way to be. I don't really think about all the outside, just doing as much as I can on the pitch."

He is similarly relaxed about his own game time. His manager, Mikel Arteta, was recently asked about leaving out Nwaneri, and explained that given the depth at his disposal some players will have to spend time on the sidelines.

"Some of them are going to start, some of them are going to finish the game, some of them are going to be on the bench and won't be participating and some of them, unfortunately, are going to be out of the squad because with the Premier League you have the limitation with the numbers," said the Gunners boss. But, based on Nwaneri's reaction to facing similar challenges last season, that doesn't seem to bother him.

"Going from playing quite a lot to not playing as much – I think it's normal in football, so I don't really take it to heart," he says. "I understand Mikel's got a decision to make at the end of the day and it's hard for him to make. He obviously wants to include everyone but he can't.

"I think it's part of football and it's those times that can really define where you're going to be. I think I've dealt with it well. I'm in a good place mentally and physically."

There is a sense that the youngster has complete trust in his manager, that whatever he believes is best must be so.

"There's a lot to learn from Mikel. If you ever met him, you'd see how intense he is. How he's so good with his words and he knows what he's saying. I think there's so much to learn, not even just tactically – mentally, and all of that stuff. On a personal level, as well, he's helped me a lot. He's elevated my game, definitely.

"He's really big on body language and the way that he presents himself. He puts that onto me. Before, maybe just the way that I'd walk or slouch a bit or just the way I'd be sitting, but he's onto

European champion... Nwaneri played all six games at the Euro U21s in the summer

Hale End graduates... Myles Lewis-Skelly and Nwaneri

> "I knew I'd do something if I got the ball. Then Dec luckily saw me. You don't really think, you just do it"
>
> Nwaneri on his wondergoal against Manchester City

Trademark finish ...Nwaneri scores against Manchester City last season

everything. That's helped me just sharpen up in my mind and it's helped me a lot."

In the summer, Nwaneri was the youngest member of the England Under-21 side that triumphed in the European Championship in Romania. Though mostly used from the bench, he did play in all six matches including the last half hour of the final.

He will still be eligible for the next edition of the competition in 2027, and is likely to be one of the key players – unless he has become established in the senior squad by then. Bookmakers rate his chances of being selected for next summer's World Cup squad at around 10/1, although competition for places will be fierce. Indeed, when asked if making it to North America is among his objectives for next year, he says: "Yes, but in the same way it will be for everyone."

For now, of course, his first priority is more minutes with his club. He is, along with Lewis-Skelly and Dowman, one of the poster boys for the next generation of young Arsenal talent. Saka, a role model to them all, is an example of what Hale End products can achieve.

"Bukayo is a great person. He's an even better player. Honestly, there's so much I can learn. He's a player that you just need to watch to learn from and take from his game. I think he's helped me so much in that respect."

The prospect of Nwaneri lining up with his idol to the side of him, his best mate Lewis-Skelly behind him and his understudy Dowman to the other side is an exciting one – and could yet serve as another riposte to Hansen's infamous dismissal of young players if Arsenal can finally reclaim the Premier League title.

"I'm extremely excited. I think there's a lot to come."

Teenage kicks

The 24 teenage talents to have appeared in the Premier League so far this season

Liverpool prodigy...Rio Ngumoha

Josh ACHEAMPONG	*(Chelsea)*
Harrison ARMSTRONG	*(Everton, now on loan at Preston)*
Lucas BERGVALL	*(Tottenham Hotspur)*
Bradley BURROWES	*(Aston Villa)*
Tyler DIBLING	*(Everton)*
Max DOWMAN	*(Arsenal)*
ESTEVAO	*(Chelsea)*
Ben GANNON-DOAK*	*(Bournemouth)*
Tyrique GEORGE	*(Chelsea)*
Archie GRAY	*(Tottenham Hotspur)*
Luis GUILHERME	*(West Ham United)*
Marc GUIU	*(Sunderland/Chelsea)*
Jorrel HATO	*(Chelsea)*
Ayden HEAVEN	*(Manchester United)*
Josh KING	*(Fulham)*
Eli Junior KROUPI	*(Bournemouth)*
Myles LEWIS-SKELLY	*(Arsenal)*
Lewis MILEY	*(Newcastle United)*
Veljko MILOSAVLJEVIC	*(Bournemouth)*
Rio NGUMOHA	*(Liverpool)*
Ethan NWANERI	*(Arsenal)*
Chris RIGG	*(Sunderland)*
Stefanos TZIMAS	*(Brighton)*
Leny YORO*	*(Manchester United)*

*Will turn 20 in November

6 of the best

Teenage tyros

Nick Bidwell picks out some Under-20s starlets making a name for themselves around the globe

1 Vasilije ADZIC
JUVENTUS

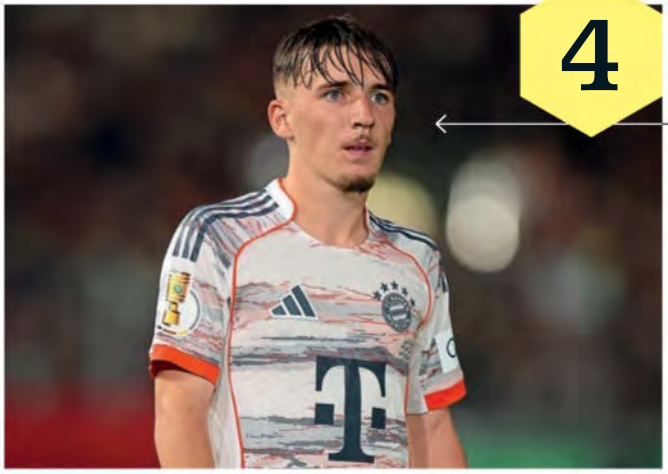
Although not yet an automatic first-choice for the *Bianconeri*, the 19-year-old Montenegro midfielder – who's already a senior international having progressed through the various youth levels – is knocking hard at the door, his hopes of a permanent slot rendered all the more realistic by the late match-winning screamer he struck home recently in a 4-3 Serie A win over Internazionale. Comfortable in any number of positions – in central box-to-box mode, as a number ten or wide on the left – he is in his second season in Turin, brought in for just €2 million from Buducnost Podgorica. A technically flawless individual blessed with a maturity beyond his years, above-average football IQ and second helpings of stamina and drive.

2 Marc BERNAL
BARCELONA

After missing almost all of last season with a torn ACL, the outstanding defensive midfielder, still only 18, is at long last fit again, a return to duty which should put a smile on the faces of both the *Blaugrana* faithful and coach Hansi Flick. Having idolised Sergio Busquets growing up, Bernal has all the tools to be a full Spain international in the not-too-distant future: the height, presence and physicality; magnificent left-footed passing skills; innate awareness of everything going on around him; grace under pressure and perhaps most important of all, the ease with which he glides into advanced areas of the field. No wonder the club have tied him down to a new deal until the summer of 2029.

3 George ILENIKHENA
MONACO

The Monegasque powers-that-be wisely decided not to succumb to big-money offers from Germany, Spain and Italy for their 19-year-old striker this summer. Since swapping Belgian club Antwerp for Monte Carlo at the start of last season, the young front-man – born in Nigeria but raised in the Paris suburbs – has experienced some tough times at the Stade Louis II: long stints on the subs' bench, as well as suffering a nasty adductor injury early this year. But he undoubtedly has huge potential, an enticing skill-set of speed, physical potency, directness and a punishing left-footed shot. A runaway train on getting into his stride and a fine poacher in the box.



4 Lennart KARL
BAYERN MUNICH

At a time when the Bavarians are coming under heavy fire in the local media for not putting sufficient faith in homegrown youth talent, this outrageously-gifted attacking midfielder or wide-man might just turn out to be the one academy graduate that the club simply dare not ignore. Technically outstanding, dynamic, a wonderful dribbler and one-on-one finisher, and full of commitment, the diminutive 17-year-old only made his senior competitive debut at this summer's FIFA Club World Cup and enjoyed his first Bundesliga start in September, featuring in a 4-1 away victory at Hoffenheim. The one attribute the Germany Under-17 schemer lacks at the moment is robustness, but that should come with age.

5 Rodrigo MORA
PORTO

Recruitment chiefs the length and breadth of Europe will have noted with barely-concealed excitement tthat this generational playmaker doesn't appear to be a first-choice pick for new Porto boss Francesco Farioli. A fresh-faced kid, 18, he has that all-too-rare ability to make the extraordinary look an everyday occurrence. Instead of regularly deploying Mora, Farioli has preferred to bestow the number ten role on the recently-acquired Spaniard Gabri Veiga who, it has to be said, has settled in excellently since arriving from the Saudi Pro League. It is a decision that has surprised many pundits given Mora became the centrepiece around which Porto's offensive game was based last season, scoring ten league goals in an impressive debut campaign.

6 RAYAN
VASCO DA GAMA

On the radar of the likes of PSG, Milan and Porto, the dexterous, powerful and mobile frontrunner is not likely to remain at the famous Rio outfit for long. His greatest strength might be his versatility, equally impressive as a roving right-winger or as a stealthy second striker. A South American champion with Brazil's U17s and U20s, the 19-year-old has been on Vasco's books since the age of six, gravitating to the club where his father Valkmar once played and coached. Goals are in his blood; in five years with Vasco's schoolboy side, he amassed 292.

INDIA

League FOCUS

2024-25 ISL champions ...Mohun Bagan SG

2025-26 TEAMS

- Bengaluru
- Chennaiyin
- East Bengal
- Goa
- Hyderabad
- Inter Kashi
- Jamshedpur
- Kerala Blasters
- Mohammedan
- Mohun Bagan
- Mumbai City
- NorthEast United
- Odisha
- Punjab

INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE – A BRIEF HISTORY

The Indian Super League was born in 2010 as an agreement between the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and its commercial partner Football Sports Development Ltd (FSDL). It actually kicked off in 2014 with eight franchise teams, containing ageing stars such as Nicolas Anelka and Alessandro Del Piero. At that point, the season lasted just a few weeks as a standalone competition. But it slowly grew to become a 13-team, six-month competition in 2024-25. By that time, it had become the top tier in India, replacing the I-League and sending teams into Asian competitions.

THE FORMAT

The 14 teams play each other home and away in a straight league system. The top team become champions and win the ISL Shield as well as securing a place in the AFC Champions League Two, the only Indian team to automatically qualify for Asian competition. The season does not end there, though. The top six teams go on to play in the end-of-season ISL Cup. The third-place team takes on sixth and fourth meets fifth in single-leg games, with the winners advancing to face the top two, who await them in two-legged semi-finals. The final showpiece is a one-off game.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*League Shields*	*Cups*	*Last title*
Mohun Bagan	4	2	2	2025
Mumbai City	4	2	2	2024
ATK	3	0	3	2020
Chennaiyin	2	0	2	2018

Goa and Jamshedpur (League Shields), and Hyderabad and Bengaluru (Cups) are tied on one title each

The close season has been chaotic. Will the 2025-26 season be a shorter campaign?
The new Indian Super League campaign should have started in September, but kick-off was postponed due to the 15-year Master Rights Agreement (MRA) signed between the FSDL and the AIFF in 2010 coming to an end in December. This set out the financial arrangements, with the federation getting paid a set fee of around £4 million every year. A new deal was proposed which would see the clubs getting a share of the league's ownership, but this was refused by the federation who preferred the former arrangement. With no new deal in place by July, the FSDL paused the start.

The Supreme Court was also involved and it has all taken a lot longer than it should have. It could be that there won't be time to get the full 26 league games and the ISL Cup finished in time before FIFA's rule that all comes to an end by May 31. A shorter season than usual may be in store.

Will a local striker emerge?
One of the biggest football stories of this year was the recall of Sunil Chhetri to the national team in March, just months after he had retired from international football. The 41-year-old, the third-highest active international goalscorer in the world behind Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, is still the biggest name in Indian football. The recall of the Bengaluru striker was not a surprise, as he was the second highest-scorer in the ISL last season. The problem is that there were none of his compatriots in the top ten.

ONE TO WATCH

Photo credit: Instagram @Keralablasters

Korou SINGH

(Kerala Blasters)

There are high hopes for the 18-year-old – not just at his club but all over India. Last season was an encouraging one as he became the youngest-ever player to appear for the southerners, who signed him after a standout performance in the Under-17 Asian Cup in 2023, and the youngest in the ISL's history to record an assist. Kerala see the speedy right-winger, who can play a bit deeper if needed, as a crucial player this season and recently extended his deal to 2029. By then, if the progress continues, he will already have played many times for India.

India, the national team and the league, needs some local goals but the simple fact is that most teams look overseas for attacking talent. The question as to who will be Chhetri's successor has been talked about for some time. Vikram Partap Singh, Manvir Singh and Rahim Ali have all been given their chance for the national team but have yet to really make their case. More goals in the ISL will help, and more proof that Indians can score goals will be of help to the national team and more besides.

Indian icon... Sunil Chhetri

Can anyone break the Mumbai-Kolkata dominance?
In the past three seasons, the six main prizes – the Shield for the league winners and the Cup for those that triumph in the play-offs – have been shared between Mumbai City and Mohun Bagan. The latter won both last season, giving their many fans in Kolkata much to celebrate, the latest triumph for one of Asia's oldest clubs. Mumbai, part of the City Football Group, are a newer power. Bengaluru and Chennaiyin are past winners from two of the country's biggest cities but are now going through something of a dry period.

It wouldn't be the worst thing if, when the season does eventually end, the major prizes go to some new names such as Kerala Blasters or Odisha who have been members of the league for a long time but have yet to win. Perhaps the uncertain preparation could level the playing field a little.

Can the clubs stop losing money?
It was reported that the league's total viewership last season fell to around 130 million, down from 430 million in the inaugural season a decade earlier, although that first campaign featured some hugely marketable stars.

Unsurprisingly there are financial issues, with most if not all franchises losing money. In the last deal, the money received from the central broadcasting and sponsorship pool was largely cancelled out by the franchise fees that had to be paid. Owners have swallowed the losses but it remains to be seen how much longer they will be willing to do so.

Cricket's Indian Premier League offers a constant comparison, with its multi-billion pound broadcasting deal and the best players in the world. Given the chaos of the summer, there is not much hope of riches in the coming months but some positive signs would be welcome.

John Duerden

JAN OBLAK

"It's my aim to win the Champions League – Atletico Madrid deserve it"

The Atletico goalkeeper on his quest for the biggest prizes, swapping his individual awards for team silverware, and aiming to take Slovenia to the 2026 World Cup

Your father was a goalkeeper for your hometown club Skofja Loka. When you started playing football, did you have the option to play outfield?
It seems that it was my destiny to become a goalkeeper, just like my father. At youth level I did play as an outfield player. I played as a centre-forward. I liked that too, but it was always my wish to become a goalkeeper.

Congratulations on winning yet another Zamora trophy as La Liga's best goalkeeper. You've now won it a record six times. How much do individual awards mean to you?
For sure, it is a big thing – but I cannot compare it with team titles. Without a doubt, I would swap some of those Zamora trophies for a big title with the club. Of course, I am proud and pleased about those individual awards – I know how hard it is to get there, I appreciate them – but, as I said, I would immediately swap them for some silverware with the club.

How did you assess Atletico's performance last season? Did you expect more success?
Yes, we wanted and we expected a bigger success. Our season was, eventually, sort of hot and cold. We didn't start well, but in the middle of the season we had a great run and we were in contention for all the titles. But, by March, the fire was out, so it was really a big disappointment. My expectations were much higher. In a nutshell, it was a tough season. It was difficult to accept everything that happened, how we slipped out of all battles for titles. There were hard moments, because we expected so much more.

In the Champions League you were knocked out in the last 16 by Real Madrid on penalties. During the shootout, you had the misfortune of Julian Alvarez's goal being disallowed because of two unintentional touches. Now the rule has been changed, if that happened again the player would be allowed to retake the penalty. What do you think about that?
What happened was indeed very unlucky. It was a crucial moment, a turning point for our entire season. That rule with two touches was not clear to anybody. As we speak now, believe me, it's hard for me to talk about it. Alvarez said many times that he didn't even feel that he had two touches, let alone that the trajectory of the shot didn't change. He sent the goalkeeper the wrong way, so it would have been a goal anyway. It was a moment that was very difficult for us to accept. Already then I knew that they would change that rule, that it would be modified. Sadly, we were the team that had to pay the price before the people in charge of the laws of the game changed the rule.

What are the club's expectations this season?
The expectations in the club are big. We all aim for a successful season in which we will win a title. Of course, we are aware that Real Madrid and Barcelona have great teams and top players, but we will fight until the end. It's true that we didn't start so well, but our goal remains the same: to play a good season and to try to win a title. Those are the ambitions of all at the club. We will work hard for it and we hope and believe that we can achieve those goals.

This is your 12th season with Atletico Madrid. Have you had other offers and, if so, why did you decide to stay with Atletico?
It's unbelievable that so many years have already passed. Of course there were offers, but in the end we never decided to go for a change because I always had the feeling that I still could give something more to Atletico. I always aimed for winning the Champions League, and it's still my big wish to help the club win it for the first time. I still have that hope and the strength and energy to try to achieve that big goal. A lot of things must ➤

RIYADH AIR
13

click for this to happen, but each year I believe in it and each year I'm ready to give everything in order to help Atletico win that title which I believe it deserves to win. That was one of the reasons why I never chose to leave. Not to mention the support I get from our amazing fans. I still hope that one day we will lift the Champions League trophy, to give that joy to our fans who support us all the time. They deserve it.

Atletico supporters have a song for you: "Oblak, everyday I love you more." How did you feel the first time that you heard thousands of fans singing your name?
Yes, it's a nice song. I don't remember when I heard it for the first time. It was a long time ago. Sometimes during a game you don't hear what people shout or sing. Still, when you feel that energy from the fans, that positive energy towards you, it always helps you to give your maximum in the game. That great support from our fans means a lot to me, to all of us.

You have a contract until 2028. Are you thinking about staying in Madrid until the end of your career, or would you like to take on a challenge in another club in another league?
To be honest, I never think too much about when my contract is going to expire. From the beginning until today, I've always taken things season by season, with the wish to do the best for the team, for the club, with the wish to try to win all titles. It's the same this year. I really do not think a lot about the future. Also, as we know, it's not only us, the players, who make choices – it's also up to the club.

Have you thought about what you might do once your playing career finishes?
I don't have any clear and big plans. In my mind I am focused on the present moment. If I stay healthy and fit, I would like to continue playing as long as possible at the highest level. After that, what must happen will happen. I'm sure that I'll manage to find something. When the time comes, I'll think about it.

Fans' favourite...Oblak with the Atleti crowd

Heartbreak...Oblak reaches for a penalty during last season's shootout defeat to rivals Real Madrid in the Champions League

Euro 2024...Oblak saves Cristiano Ronaldo's penalty during extra-time in the last 16 against Portugal

You played at the FIFA Club World Cup earlier this summer. What do you think about this new tournament?
It was interesting, and I'm sure that with the years this competition will develop and progress, that it will become better in terms of organisation and all other aspects. I believe that it will progress and in future become an even bigger thing than it is now.

The role of the goalkeeper has changed quite a lot in recent years. Do you find it irritating how some teams insist on passing out from the back?
I think that there is too much talk about it. Goalkeepers are important and many goalkeepers play really well with their feet. How the build-up play is organised depends on the coach, on the team, on the ability of the players. If the goalkeeper has options to play, to pass the ball to a free player, that's no problem. Of course, some teams prefer to play more from the back, some teams less, but I think that there are a lot of goalkeepers who are able to play in the way the coach asks them to do. Naturally, there are some goalkeepers who like to play with their feet more, but at the top level all goalkeepers are capable to play in that way.

> "It would be great if I could fulfil my dream to play with Slovenia at a World Cup"

Slovenia had an excellent campaign at Euro 2024, knocked out by Portugal on penalties in the last 16 after a goalless draw. How do your reflect on the tournament?
It was a really great European Championship in Germany, with so many Slovenian fans. It was a beautiful experience. Sadly, we didn't manage to get past Portugal in the round of 16. We were close. I think only a bit of luck was missing. Our team really gave their maximum. We played on a high level. No opponent, no matter how strong it was, had it easy against us. So on the one hand we can be pleased with our performances and results, but on the other hand I'm still disappointed that we failed to reach the quarter-finals. We had a big chance, but we didn't take it.

In the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, you are in a group with Switzerland, Sweden and Kosovo. What are your chances of finishing in the top two?
I think that we are in a really difficult group, where everybody can beat everybody. Switzerland are the strongest team, but also Sweden are a serious rival with some big names who play for big clubs, while Kosovo will also be a difficult opponent – and they too want to qualify for the World Cup. Still, I hope that we can qualify. It would be great if I could fulfil my dream to play with Slovenia at a World Cup. Our team will do everything to achieve that goal.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Road to the World Cup...Oblak makes a save at the feet of Sweden's Viktor Gyokeres during 2026 World Cup qualifying

BENNI McCARTHY

"We have an opportunity to wake up a sleeping giant"

The Kenya head coach on his team's impressive performances at the recent African Nations Championship and building for the future

After almost a decade as a coach at club level, including on the staff at Manchester United, how have you found the irregular rhythm of being a national team coach?
That is the one thing that I've kind of struggled to get to grips with because I'm no longer active every day, so the switch has been crazy. It has been hard to adjust, because you go from working with players every single day, getting to know players, their personalities, prepping for training, prepping for meetings, prepping for games every weekend. You're on your toes every day. But when it comes to the national team, you just go and watch matches and watch players. You get data and feedback from everyone, speak to clubs, speak to managers, speak to coaches, know about their players, and then sometimes go and watch training sessions at clubs. But oh my God – you're not part of it, you're just on the outside, you're just watching. And that's my killer – I so want to be involved!

The one positive is it allows me to go home to Scotland more frequently and spend more time with the family. But of course, you achieve so much more when you work on a daily basis.

Your unveiling as Kenya coach in March was quite an event amid much excitement. They seemed so thrilled to have you there...
Honestly, I kind of felt like I was back in 1998 when I broke through with the South African team, finishing top scorer at the Africa Cup of Nations finals and then scoring at the World Cup finals. It was crazy then how my life changed, I became an overnight sensation, the darling son of the new era of South African football – and that's what it feels like in Kenya at the moment. Everybody is optimistic and excited about the team, the players that we've picked, and they can't wait for the national team to play.

I've been told we've just united a whole country. I didn't know that there were so many different tribes and interests and factions in football in Kenya. It seems to have been very political previously but now our selection is on merit only and everyone is getting a chance to play, and even the country's president said to me: "Wow, this national team really brought the country together".

That obviously had a lot to do with the co-hosting of the African Nations Championship (CHAN) in mid-year. It must have been heartbreaking to go out in the quarter-finals after a penalty shootout?
Yes it was, because my sights were set on at least getting to the final. We could have done it – the path after the group stage was perfectly laid out for us to progress right to the end. It was heartbreaking to lose to Madagascar on penalties because I really felt we had the momentum going our way. I would have fancied us against [eventual winners] Morocco in the final because they have a very predictable approach, trying to finish the game off in the first 15-20 minutes, trying to go ahead and then catch you on the counter. We beat them in the group stage because I figured if we could draw them out, we can hit them and that's exactly what we did. Even when we went down to ten men, we knew exactly what to do. So I knew we would have a good chance against them if we got them in the final. But unfortunately, penalties didn't agree with us.

Have you now created a bit of an unrealistic expectation?
No, I'm honest with people. I'm honest with the media. I'm honest with the players. I want to play and win against everyone, but we have to be realistic. It's a process. It's not going to just come overnight. You win one game, and then some fans expect us to compete with Morocco, with South Africa, with all the top teams on the continent. But we have to take it step by step. People mustn't get carried away because of the CHAN. Yes, the team did amazing and more than expected, but then we got humbled in the World Cup qualifiers when we lost against The Gambia.

Yes, I would love to win everything, but I'm also realistic that our team is not as great as the results have shown. But in two years' time, for the next AFCON [which Kenya will co-host with Tanzania and Uganda], then I want to have a team that doesn't just tick boxes. I want a competitive team.

You will presumably need a stronger squad for that to occur?
There has been a nice boost of late with players that are playing at European clubs popping up that have a Kenyan father or Kenyan mother. Zak Vyner at Bristol City has a parent from Kenya and he's eligible to play for us. There is an exciting left-winger at FC Cologne [Linton Maina] who we're hoping to have join us. A bigger pool of international players does not mean that I want to take away from the local players. But if you go to major tournaments, you want to go with the strongest and the best players that you can have, in order to give yourself a chance.

What about Kenyan footballers going to overseas clubs?
Yeah, there's more now after the CHAN tournament. Five from our squad have made moves to clubs outside the country, to bigger leagues in Tunisia, the Middle East and Austria.

I think slowly but surely, we're changing the players' lives, and giving them great opportunities and a platform. And it's a great incentive for the younger ones who are coming through the ranks that the opportunities are increasing.

Are you confident you will get the necessary resources to best prepare for Kenya hosting the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations finals?
The president of the country and the government are committed to the national team, to football. Because of what we've achieved in the CHAN, I think they can see some progress and they know if you offer the resources and invest a little bit in the team, it can achieve. So I think they've set aside funds for us to prepare pretty well. They have already invested a lot in the stadiums that they will use for the AFCON in 2027 and the new Talanta Stadium is going to be spectacular. The football federation, together with the government, is working nicely together to try to give us the best conditions for success, because they want to make football enjoy some of the success that Kenya has had in athletics. It will never be as popular and as successful as athletics, but they want football to be at least 75% of what athletics is doing for the country.

East Africa has never had much success in continental football. Are the region's countries sleeping giants?
Potentially, yes, if the governments gets involved with the sport in a good way, financially backing the players and the national team as well. That will really give us an opportunity to wake up that sleeping giant.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Photo credit: Alamy

JEREMY KELLY

"I remember seeing the guys thinking: 'Who the eff is this American?'"

The former Colorado Rapids and Crawley Town midfielder reflects on a nomadic career in France, England and the United States

You're very well travelled. Do you feel British, American or maybe French?
I have an English dad and an American mum, who met in the States at university, and I have British and American passports. Mum took a job in banking in the Czech Republic and I was only there for a year. I don't have much recollection of living in the Czech Republic but I spent ten years in France, then moved to the US. I had a little bit of a French accent for a while!

What are your earliest memories of kicking a ball?
As young as I can remember. We'd play after school on whatever patch of grass we could find, and I always say that that experience of playing football in France was a massive part of my development. Football is definitely growing in the States but it's not at the level it is at in France.

When did you realise you could play?
At seven or eight when I was called up to play for the older team. But really, at that age, it's all about enjoyment. I had no thoughts of a football career at that point – I just wanted to play every chance I got. I watched all the Premier League, Champions League, German league matches, I loved it and consumed as much as I could. Now, I don't watch as many games on TV because as a pro you find yourself analysing a bit too much, comparing yourself to other players. I would see Christopher Nkunku, who is the same age as me and was from a similar area to me close to Paris, playing in the Champions League and be thinking: "Could have been me."

Did you feel going to the States as a youngster was a good move?
I was so mad at my parents for moving us to the US! I thought: "My football career is done." I had the misconception – and it is a misconception – at the time that they don't play football. At that moment, I felt my career was going to die. But I got here and of course found that there were lots of great coaches. I knew I was probably good enough to play pro, but I wasn't at one of the big MLS clubs and I was a small kid. I didn't have much pace, power or physicality. I was always a bit overlooked.

In February last year, you finished a short spell at FC Tulsa and moved across the Atlantic to Crawley Town. What did you know about the club and the league?
I didn't know much about Crawley but I would have gone anywhere in the UK. I have family in Sussex and that made the move so much easier. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for but I got out of my comfort zone. I remember walking onto the training field for the first time and seeing the guys thinking: "Who the eff is this American?" And that's fair enough. It was a little nerve-racking but a great experience. When I started, we were seven points off the play-offs with everything to play for. With promotion and then relegation the following year, I think it's true to say I had the full English football experience in the space of 18 months.

That summer, after reaching League One, many of the team went their separate ways. You stayed to fight relegation, ultimately going straight back down last term. Were you sad that that team broke up?
After a few years playing full-time, you realise players will move on and everyone has their reasons for doing that. Some of those who left might have been more surprising than others but you get on with it and switch your focus to the guys who are in the changing room with you. Yes, we knew it would be a challenge, but for the most part we felt pretty positive. I believe we played well enough to stay up but sometimes that's football. I do think we stay up seven out of ten times with that group of players.

Manager Scott Lindsey, now in his second spell in charge at Crawley, said he cried when you left in June...
I find myself getting emotional hearing that. I have the utmost respect for Scott. I loved him and loved playing for him. He had faith in me and that's all you can ask for from a manager. He genuinely made me feel like the best player in the world. We had a different style to most teams, and who knows if I had gone to another League One or League Two team that it would have worked out. I was so sad to leave Crawley and I can say it definitely wasn't for football reasons that I did. I can't say much more but it was the right time for me to go and the right opportunity for me in Charleston.

Had returning to the US and joining Charleston Battery in the USL Championship been on your radar?
I had thought about going back a lot but I am so glad I took that leap of faith to go to England in 2023. I had a link to Charleston with my former manager [from the now defunct Memphis 901] Ben Pirmann. It's a four-hour drive from my home and I played with a lot of these guys, which helped the transition. The team are top of the league and have eased me back into 100% match shape. The weather is a little different – 100-degree heat and humidity that's out of control, so we train at 9am each morning to avoid the worst of the heat.

Has soccer in the United States changed since you first started out?
The atmosphere is different – it maybe is more family-friendly – but the people really know their football in the US these days and deserve a bit more credit for that. The difference would be that every single game counts for so much in terms of relegation or promotion or the play-offs in England. It has real impact and supporters will come up to you to talk to you about a good performance – or the reverse. There's a financial impact too and I'm glad I experienced that world. I don't know if I'll be back but I have so much love for Crawley.

Are you pleased with the interesting and varied career you've had so far, after fearing you wouldn't make it in the game?
I was a late developer and in the US you find yourself playing against players who are massive and look like giants. You're a little scared going into matches but that definitely helps you develop. It provided me with what I needed. I'm still not the most physical now. The experience gives you a chip on your shoulder. I've always felt that it gives you the motivation you need sometimes. The US game is a lot about fast, athletic players and I became so motivated to stand out. I'd say the chip remains to this day.

Interview by Matthew Nash

NOLBERTO SOLANO

"Pakistan doesn't have a professional league, so it's not like you can go on the weekend and watch players"

The former Peru and Newcastle United winger discusses the difficulties of managing the Pakistan national team, and how he and the Pakistan Football Federation hope to help football progress in the South Asian nation

When did you realise that you wanted to be a coach?
It's a privilege to play football. But, compared to other professions, you retire very early, so the passion and energy are still there. I finished playing at Hartlepool United in 2012. Dropping down the divisions, the football was more direct and physical. I started to feel more like telling people what to do on the pitch. I was convinced that I wanted to be a coach. I was still living around Newcastle, so I started to do my coaching badges in England. Sometimes, as footballers, we think we know everything about football, but coaching is completely different. It involves a lot of different things.

Of all the managers you played for, who had the biggest influence on you?
I always try to take the best from everyone. I would never criticise a coach, even if I didn't like their decisions. When you're young, you might disagree with the coach leaving you out the team but afterwards you understand that you can't play every week. I had some very good coaches in England and before then. In football, I still believe it's up to the players. If you have a good team of players – you coach them well and treat them well – they will respond to you on the pitch.

You spent seven years on the coaching staff of the Peru national team. What did it mean to you to help your country qualify for the World Cup in 2018?
We had a big football history and a lot of talented players. The spirit we had was amazing. South America is always very strong with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia and now Ecuador. I arrived as assistant coach in 2015, and we qualified for the World Cup in Russia. It was a great experience with my boss, Ricardo Gareca, who's from Argentina. He was amazing. A humble guy who helped me to know more about football. To qualify for the first time in 36 years was really good for the country.

You've had several managerial roles so far, but most have been at struggling clubs and have only lasted a few months. Do you feel like you've not had the chance yet to prove yourself?
Yeah, football has changed at every level. When I arrived in England, I was surprised to see managers spending five, six, seven years at a club. That doesn't happen anymore. There's a lot of pressure on coaches to get results. When you arrive at a club, the chairman needs to realise what the situation is and give you time. I've been bouncing between different teams and situations, but unfortunately that's the way it is. I still believe in myself.

Have you found it hard to get the right opportunities to show what you can do?
I love to do things. That's why I took this opportunity with Pakistan. There are a lot of coaches and ex-footballers like myself around the world, so it's tough to get a job. You have to take any opportunity. I'd love to be in the Premier League one day – it's a dream to be sitting there with so many assistants around me! – but I'm here with just my fitness coach. That's part of the challenge. Everything can't be perfect. I have to leave my playing career behind me and prove how good I can be as a head coach.

How did you end up becoming the Pakistan manager in June?
The [Pakistan Football Federation] president got in touch with me. I think he wanted an ex-footballer who'd played at a high level because Pakistan haven't really had a head coach like that before. It's always an honour to be with a national team; it doesn't matter what level the country plays at or what role you have. Now there's a lot of hard work to do. Pakistan doesn't have a professional league, so it's not like you can go on the weekend, sit in the stands and watch players. Here, you're waiting to see if there are any tournaments.

What appealed to you about the job? Did you have any fears about taking it?
Football in Pakistan is still behind so many other countries. There have been many issues. ➤

Photo credit: Haider Ali
(Instagram @haider.hp)

People in Pakistan have always been more interested in cricket and even hockey. One of the big reasons for coming here was the new president [of the PFF], Mohsen Gilani. He was working for FIFA before. He wants to push his country forward and help develop football in Pakistan. I'm happy to have his support and be part of his project. He knows where we are and that results won't come straightaway.

Considering the many issues that Pakistan has faced in recent years – disputes within the PFF, the domestic league shutting down, the national team being banned by FIFA – are you concerned about how difficult this job will be?
I knew all the issues before I jumped in, but I'm not an experienced manager who's in the position to turn down a job when they're offered it. Everything is a great opportunity for me. I'm a really positive person. I'm not expecting to be sacked after four or five games with all of these things going on.

"Great experience"...Solano in the dugout alongside Peru head coach Ricardo Gareca at the 2018 World Cup

I'm not looking for an excuse. I want to see what we can do. Anything good we can do will be a plus. We're here to help and not to complain. If I wanted to complain, I wouldn't have taken the decision to move here.

After all the uncertainty that the PFF has faced in the past, what are Mohsen

PFF appointment... Solano is in charge of the Pakistan seniors and Under-23s sides
Photo credit: Haider Ali (Instagram @haiderhp)

Previous progress...Pakistan beat Cambodia 1-0 in World Cup qualifying in October 2023 before Solano's arrival

Playing career...Solano made 302 Premier League appearances, including 230 for Newcastle United

Gilani's plans for the national team and football in Pakistan generally?
Pakistan was away from football for many years. It's very sad. It's no good for football and the people who love it. FIFA believe in Mohsen Gilani because he's a guy who loves football and they don't want Pakistan to have the same problems that they did in the past. I always say to him: "It doesn't matter where you are, international football is a high level, so we need to make sure we prepare the players." They need help. They need to play competitive football. That's the next big step.

Why is it so important for Pakistan to establish its own professional league?
I'm not discovering something new. Football's always been like this. It doesn't matter what level you play at as long as you compete; that you understand what it means to fight for the title or to avoid relegation. These boys need that. In the Under-23s, I have five or six good players. They have talent but no fitness because they don't train and play regularly. It's a huge country with 250 million people. The federation need to start looking seriously at giving these young talents a future and a career. These guys can't play for nothing. They need to look after their families.

You're responsible for managing both the senior team and the Under-23s. How does that arrangement work?
I feel like I'm in a test tube and they want to see how I respond! They want me to look after the Under-23s and the senior team. I have to leave the selection of local boys to the coaches a little bit because they know them better. I have to search for professional players. There are a lot of young lads in different leagues – England, Denmark, Poland, Australia. I have to bring over the best ones to compete because they're fit and they're training every day.

> "There are a lot of players around the whole world, including in England, who have family from Pakistan and could play for the national team"

There are a lot of players of Pakistani heritage who are potentially eligible for selection. Are you looking to recruit some of them to strengthen your squad?
Of course. There are a lot of players around the whole world, including in England, who have family from Pakistan and could play for the national team. I have to convince a lot of them because of all the issues that Pakistan has had in the past. That hasn't helped, but now it looks like they want to change. A lot of players in Europe are already getting in touch and asking me to take a look at them. People are interested in being part of the national team and progressing with their country. We need to try to bring players from abroad to make the team a little bit stronger, and mix them in with the players already here.

In September, your Under-23s team lost all three of their qualifiers for the Asian Cup. What did you learn from that experience?
We had a training camp for ten days. We lost to Iraq, Cambodia and Oman [the latter two 1-0]. After 60 minutes, we were losing 2-1 to Iraq despite having a player sent off, but we ended up losing 8-1 because one of our players got injured and we didn't have any substitutes left. We were really pleased with how well the boys responded. Even though none of them had had a pre-season, they got through playing 90 minutes every three days. I've found some very good talent. I was very impressed. We learned that these guys need football and they need more instruction. When you're talking tactically, they understand but you can tell they've missed so much football. They're hungry for opportunities to play.

What do you hope to achieve in your time with Pakistan?
My contract is only for one year. We'll take it game by game and see how far we can get with these boys. Whenever I leave here, it would be nice to see some progress. Hopefully the federation has a league. That would be great for all the footballers here. I hope, in a year's time, when we sit down with the federation and discuss what we're going to do next, they still have the same mentality to progress.

Interview by Sean Cole

Eye on MCOs

Women's football

Multi-club ownership groups in North America are increasingly turning their attention to the women's game, writes **Steve Menary**

MCO FILES

WOMEN'S MCO GROUPS
Kynisca Sports International: Washington Spirit (USA), London City Lionesses (England), OL Lyonnes (France)
Mercury13: Bristol City (England), Como (Italy)
Monarch Collective: Angel City (USA), San Diego Wave (USA), Boston Legacy (USA)

Game changers... Michele Kang's London City Lionesses won promotion to the WSL last summer

A flood of investors, primarily from North America, has transformed club ownership in men's football in Europe and increasingly the rest of the world, and is also beginning to make inroads into the women's game.

Many multi-club ownership groups have stakes in women's sides primarily through ownership of men's sides. But in 2023, Michele Kang's Kynisca Sports International created the first women's-only MCO group, with deals for National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) side Washington Spirit in the USA, Olympique Lyonnais Feminin in France, and England's London City Lionesses. Having rebranded the French club in the summer to OL Lyonnes, the French word for Lionesses, it is clear that a brand is being developed by the businesswoman.

As an early pioneer, Kang was feted and received a lot of media attention, particularly after valuations of women's sides in the US began to rise steeply.

In March 2024, San Diego Wave were sold for around $120 million to the Levine Leichtman Family Office by previous owner, Ron Burkle. That summer, Bob Iger, former chief executive officer of the Disney

London City Lionesses owner ...Michele Kang (L) watches her team in WSL action

Corporation, agreed a takeover of Angel City that valued the NWSL side at a record $250m.

These surging valuations did not go unnoticed in America's investment community, and other private equity groups were soon getting ready to emulate Kang.

Monarch Collective, led by Kara Nortman and Jasmine Robinson, launched a fund aimed at raising $150m to invest in women's soccer, but such was the interest from the likes of Melinda French Gates' Pivotal Ventures, and former Netflix executive Cindy Holland that the fund hit its pre-set ceiling of $250m. Stakes in US clubs Angel City, San Diego Wave and NWSL expansion side Boston Legacy have now been acquired by Monarch.

With investors eager to get involved in a rapidly growing market, valuations of NWSL sides continued to shoot up. The Utah Royals reportedly changed hands for $100m in the summer, which was an impressive return for serial American MCO investor David Blitzer who had paid a $2m expansion fee to relaunch the side in 2022.

For would-be MCO groups in the US, inflated prices were not the only obstacle to growing a portfolio of clubs. The NWSL also has a cap on private equity stakes of no more than three clubs.

Allied to steeply rising valuations for clubs, this prompted investors to look outside North America. In the summer, Monarch was linked with purchasing a stake in WSL side West Ham United. In October, Crux Football, founded by former New Zealand captain Bex Smith, purchased French side Montpellier HSC with the stated ambition of adding more clubs in the future.

Avenue Sports Fund, ran by billionaire Marc Lasry, also began looking to Europe after moves for Angel City and North Carolina Courage fell through. In late 2024, Avenue invested not in a football team but in Mercury13, an MCO investment group focused on the women's game. Founded by Victoire Cogevina Reynal and Mario Malave, the group had just purchased a stake in Como.

The women's game in Italy benefits from a free-to-air TV deal but the most attractive target is England, where the national team's victory at Euro 2022 led to a surge in interest by fans and sponsors. In September of this year, Mercury13 – emboldened by Lasry's backing – agreed a deal for a stake in Bristol City's women's side. "Our entry into the English football pyramid is a major milestone for Mercury13," said Malave.

US investment fund Sixth Street, the majority investor in NWSL's Bay FC, also appears to be looking to England after recruiting Kay Cossington, a former technical director at the FA, as part of preparations to launch a women's MCO group.

Rebranded... Kang renamed Lyon to OL Lyonnes in the summer

Eye on MCOs

With interest growing from investors, valuations of English clubs have also soared with Chelsea's women's side put at £200m after Reddit founder Alexis Ohanian purchased a 10% stake for £20m in May 2025.

Tim Keech, co-founder of MRKT Insights, which advises a number of men's MCO groups, says: "In the US, every Major League Soccer club had a women's team that was viewed as a cost centre, but when the big deals began to go through, they began to be viewed as an asset. That's now happening in England, where clubs with women's teams now see that cost centre as an asset."

Existing transactions in Europe have typically seen clubs sell stakes in their women's sides, but the future could be for MCO groups comprised of clubs completely carved out of the men's side. This is one prediction in a recent report, *Breakaway: How Multi-Club Ownership May Reshape Women's Soccer*, by Clifford Chance and Brera Holdings, the only MCO group listed on a stock market with its shares on the US Nasdaq exchange.

"With soaring viewership of women's sports, growing participation in female youth leagues and female athletes ever more becoming household names, it may be time for MCOs to launch a US-model of ownership and operations for European women's teams," the report said.

"As the women's game continues to mature commercially, it is increasingly likely that we see carve-out transactions for European women's teams. Investors that have a deep understanding of the complexities and nuances of corporate carve-outs, with the help of experienced financial and legal advisors, will be able to successfully navigate these complexities."

Investors seeking to grow MCO groups based solely on the women's game are, however, in tricky territory.

NWSL clubs... Monarch Collective invest in both Angel City and San Diego Wave in the US

New investment... Bristol City were relegated from the WSL in 2024

For all the media interest and widespread goodwill towards a sport that was often neglected in many parts of Europe, the commercial future remains unclear.

In England, TV rights for the Women's Super League went for around £65m for five seasons from 2025-26, which is a huge increase on the previous deal that was believed to be about £8m a season, but costs are still significant.

Player wages in the women's game remain well below the male equivalent, but running a women's side with a full-time squad and coaches is still costly without the income to match these ambitions.

There have been some big attendances in England, with more than 60,000 watching Arsenal beat Manchester United in February 2024. Everton's women are now playing at the club's old Goodison Park following the men's side's move to the new Hill Dickinson Stadium, but staffing a major stadium in the hope of a big crowd is an expensive risk, particularly as average attendances in England's Women's Super League fell to 6,662 in 2024-25 from 7,366 in the previous season.

All this is a deterrent for would-be investors in women's MCO groups

Mercury13 club... Italian side Como were taken over by the MCO group in 2024

suggests Alexander Jarvis, founder of advisors Blackbridge Sports, which has worked on a number of football club takeovers including those involving MCOs.

"Most women's teams rely on subsidy from the men's side because standalone revenues are too small," says Jarvis. "Angel City is a US outlier; in England, the league is well behind and few clubs own assets or operate a solvent model. Valuations are super punchy – I just don't get it, and I can't see the ROI [return on investment] on most of the deals I've been presented with."

These valuations, particularly in Europe, are being driven by appetite from North America says Tim Keech, who adds: "Valuations show no sign of decreasing. There's a limited amount of clubs compared to men's football and the people looking in the UK know they can get a club at 10% of the value of an NWSL side. People also generally overpay for perceived growth but it's under-marketed and you can grow the commercial side and the crowds."

Transfer fees may offer an opportunity to produce a return on investment for MCO investors, with the latest summer window producing some eye-catching deals. In July, Arsenal made Canada forward Olivia Smith the first £1m women's footballer after signing her from Liverpool, while Grace Geyoro moved from PSG to Michele Kang's London City Lionesses in September for a fee originally reported to have broken the world record, though LCL later dampened those claims.

Keech says: "Player trading has never really been a feature of the women's game but is a big part of every deal I've ever seen in the men's game. It might never be the same as the men's game but overall, there's an opportunity there that there isn't in the men's game."

One thing that these new and growing MCO groups have in common is that they are all run by women. Making money is part of the deal but so is moving the women's game on and MCOs could be a big part of that future.

Clifford Chance concludes: "By leveraging shared resources across teams, MCOs create operational efficiencies and strengthen commercial opportunities, positioning women's teams for sustained success and enhancing the commercial viability of the sport."

In the men's game, that approach has often been a recipe for disaster but MCO in women's football is starting from a different position that may make its growth more sustainable.

> "As the women's game continues to mature commercially, it is increasingly likely that we see carve-out transactions for European women's teams"
>
> *Breakaway: How Multi-Club Ownership May Reshape Women's Soccer,* by Clifford Chance and Brera Holdings

Big-money signing... France midfielder Grace Geyoro joined London City Lionesses from PSG in the summer

Glenn Moore

A new European era begins

Women's Champions League replicates the men's format by switching to a league phase, while also introducing a second-tier competition

The move to a league phase in this season's UEFA Women's Champions League was designed, as in the men's competition a year prior, to produce more heavyweight match-ups and fewer dead rubbers.

We won't know until the final round of games in mid-December whether the latter is delivered, but the opening round alone produced a repeat of one of last year's semi-finals with holders Arsenal hosting eight-time winners OL Lyonnes.

It was a chastening night for the defending champions, who took an early lead but thereafter were second best and flattered by a 2-1 loss, Melchie Dumornay scoring both goals for the visitors.

Matchday four features a rematch of the other semi-final, Chelsea going to Barcelona hoping to avoid a third successive 4-1 defeat. But as with the men's event – maybe more so given the concentration of elite teams in the women's game – there is a danger that it will soon become a case of same-old, same-old.

But while familiarity can breed contempt, it also produces rivalries – and hopefully greater group-stage jeopardy and fewer mismatches.

That said, four of the opening nine matches were won by four goals or more. But if Atletico Madrid beating St Polten 6-0 wasn't a surprise the other scorelines were. Barcelona thrashed Bayern Munich 7-1, Wolfsburg put four past PSG without reply and Roma were drubbed 6-2 by Real Madrid.

Yet Chelsea were held to a 1-1 draw away to Dutch side Twente, perhaps the most unexpected result of all.

Ten countries are represented in the league phase, but no team east of Austria or, perhaps more surprisingly, Sweden. England, Spain and France have three teams apiece – half of the 18 clubs (the women's competition is half the size of the men's one).

This is the lowest number of nations represented since ten were featured in 2009-10, the first season that national league runners-up entered, when the final was staged in Getafe and won by the independent club Turbine Potsdam of Germany.

As that underlines, the landscape of the women's game has changed beyond all recognition since then. With the game's growth, it is inevitable that sponsors, broadcasters and spectators will want to see the big names. If the players are to get the salaries and stage that their talents deserve, commercial realities have to be accepted.

Nevertheless, there is still room for underdogs. OH Leuven became the first Belgian team to make it this far since Rapide Wezemaal (now Sint-Truidense) in 2007-08. Leuven, who upset Swedish champions Rosengard in qualifying, regularly host Belgium internationals and their rise is an example of the vast improvement in Belgian women's football.

> The usual suspects are favourites to contest the final in Oslo next May: finalists Arsenal and Barcelona, and losing semi-finalists Chelsea and OL Lyonnes

Underdog story... OH Leuven celebrate during qualifying

The draw gave them a relatively kind opening pair of matches, at Paris FC, where they came back from 2-0 down to take a point, then at home to Twente. But subsequent fixtures away from home against Barcelona and PSG followed by Arsenal at home were a daunting, if glamorous, prospect.

The usual suspects are favourites to contest the final in Oslo next May: last season's finalists Arsenal and Barcelona, as well as the two losing semi-finalists Chelsea and OL Lyonnes. Of these, OL Lyonnes look stronger than in recent years while Barca, though still possessing an elite starting XI, have less depth.

With PSG having lost key players and Bayern's chances put in perspective on opening night, could this season's dark horses be group stage debutants Manchester United?

Marc Skinner's side are short of European experience, with their only previous campaign ending in a qualifying-round defeat to PSG in 2023. However, they have a strong team with plenty of individual experience. Their issue is depth, and if they are to challenge they will need to keep players fit.

In a season when United's men's team are not competing in Europe at all, progressing deep in the competition gives the women's team a chance to

First-time qualifiers... Manchester United saw off Brann in qualifying

grab the spotlight. And indeed, they were impressive in qualifying, getting through a tough section to overcome PSV 4-0 and Hammarby 1-0, both in Sweden, before knocking out 2023-24 quarter-finalists Brann in the play-offs.

United lost in Bergen but won the return leg to seal a group stage spot for the first time, and they got off to a flyer there too, defeating another Norwegian side in Valerenga 1-0. Bigger tests await, but it has been a promising start.

Eintracht Frankfurt, four-time winners (albeit as the independent club 1. FFC Frankfurt), were the biggest name to fall in the qualifying round, beaten 5-1 on aggregate by Real Madrid. Also knocked out were previous last-eight entrants Slavia Prague, Fortuna Hjorring and BK Hacken (who were narrowly defeated by Atletico Madrid after extra-time), along with Internazionale and Sporting.

They all dropped into the new Women's Europa Cup. Those who survived qualifying (where Brann met Hammarby and Sporting faced Rosengard) will be among the main contenders for the second-tier competition, especially given that it does not feature any clubs from England, Spain and France as they each survived Champions League qualifying.

Round-up

Reigning Asian champions...Wuhan Jiangda of China beat Melbourne City in the 2024-25 final

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

The second Asian Champions League also reached the main group stage, in this case three groups of four. Due to the vast distances involved, fixtures will be played in hubs, in November.

Holders Wuhan Jiangda will host Group B, also featuring Iran's Bam Khatoon and qualifiers East Bengal (India) and Nasaf (Uzbekistan). Ho Chi Minh City host Group A with Melbourne City, Singapore's first qualifiers Lion City Sailors, and Stallion Laguna of the Philippines.

Group C has heavyweights Tokyo Verdy Beleza and Suwon of South Korea, plus North Korea's Naegohyang and ISPE of Myanmar. The latter will host but with matches played in the capital Yangon rather than their Mandalay base.

Last year's inaugural event ended with hosts Wuhan beating Melbourne 5-4 on penalties after a 1-1 draw. This year 25 AFC nations participated, four up on last time, while 22 didn't enter a team.

AFRICAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

The seven qualifiers for the African Champions League are known, but at the time of writing the eighth team, who will host, was yet to be chosen. The event will take place in Algeria in November.

Both of last year's finalists are back. TP Mazembe of DR Congo qualified as holders, while Morocco's AS FAR, winners in 2023, are the only team to attend all five editions to date.

The big shock was South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns being knocked out, the two-time winners losing to Zambia's ZESCO Ndola Girls in the semi-finals of their regional qualifier. ZESCO lost to Gaborone United of Botswana on penalties in the final.

USFAS Bamako (Mali), JKT Queens (Tanzania), 15 de Agosto (Equatorial Guinea) and ASEC Mimosas (Ivory Coast) have also qualified.

KANSAS TOP NWSL TABLE

Kansas City Current, only formed in 2020 and owners of the first stadium designed for women's football, have claimed their first title. They wrapped up the regular season NWSL Shield with a record five games to spare after their 14th successive win.

AUSTRALIAN LEAGUE SHRINKS

Western United have gone into "conditional hibernation" after three years in the A-League Women (more on page 82). The league, which has failed to capitalise on the popularity of the national team, is left with 11 clubs.

SHAW MOVES FOR $1.25M

Gotham FC paid $1.25m (£925,000), a record fee for an intra-NWSL move, to sign striker Jaedyn Shaw from North Carolina Courage. The 20-year-old US international had joined NCC from San Diego Wave in January for around half that.

Another big move... Jaedyn Shaw

FIFA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS CUP

Asia confederation champions Wuhan Jiangda won the first round of the new FIFA Women's Champions Cup, beating Oceania's Auckland United in China with an 88th-minute goal from Jiang Chenjing. Wuhan will meet the African champions in December, with the victors progressing to the last four tournament, to be held in London from January 28 to February 1.

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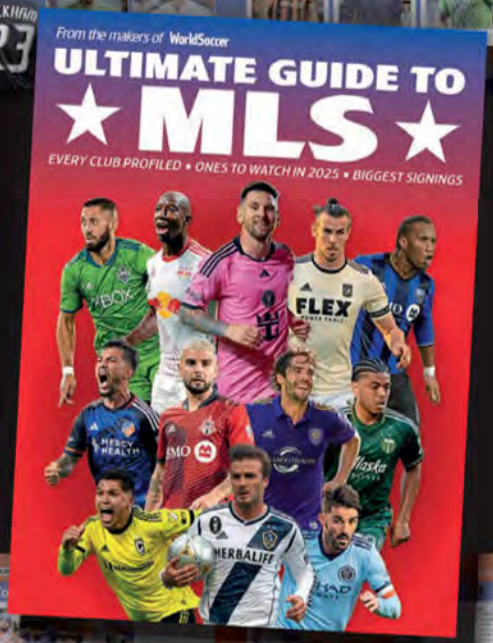

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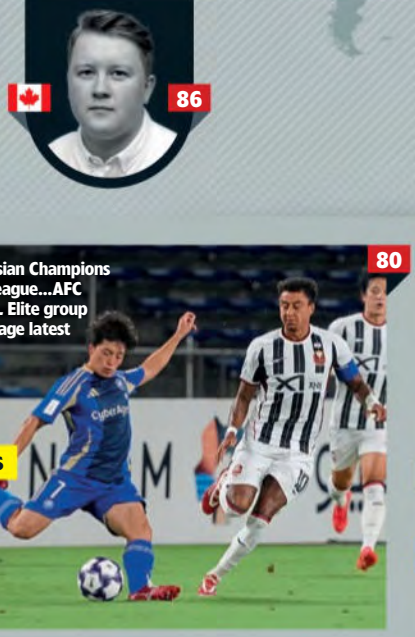

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Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Saudi dominance dented

Saudi champions Al Ittihad haven't had it all their own way in the opening rounds of the AFC Champions League Elite

Loving life...former Manchester United and England winger Jesse Lingard is in good form for FC Seoul

In May, Al Ittihad celebrated winning their tenth Saudi Pro League (SPL) title by eight points. The only downside was the fact that, in the same month, they had to watch Jeddah rivals Al Ahli lift the AFC Champions League Elite trophy in front of 60,000 delighted fans.

No matter: the new campaign would give manager Laurent Blanc the chance to add to the club's pair of continental titles, won in 2004 and 2005 – or so he thought. In September, the French coach was out after the Tigers had lost their first two games.

Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante and Fabinho have all won European titles with Real Madrid, Chelsea and Liverpool respectively, but are finding that Asia's top-tier tournament is no walk in the park. Successive defeats against Al Wahda and then Shabab Al Ahli, both of the United Arab Emirates, combined with a loss in the first crunch game in the SPL against Al Nassr, saw Blanc sent on his way.

The format, with the top eight from each of the two 12-team groups going through to the knockout stage, means that Al Ittihad should still progress. But results need to improve and quickly – especially given that their rivals Al Hilal have started well.

Hilal's manager, Simone Inzaghi, was last seen in Europe losing with Internazionale to Paris Saint-Germain in the final of the UEFA Champions League. The four-time champions started with two wins, over Al Duhail of Qatar in Riyadh and then an entertaining 3-2 victory over Nasaf Qarshi in southern Uzbekistan, helped by a wondergoal from a new signing. Theo Hernandez, impressive since joining from Milan, dribbled past five defenders to score.

Al Ahli have also started well in their title defence, collecting three points against Nasaf of Uzbekistan and one against Al Duhail.

Last season, the three Saudi representatives not only reached the last four but dominated the group stage, taking the top three spots, losing just one game in a combined total of 24 that brought 61 points. It was always going to be hard to replicate that dominance but not impossible given that Al Ittihad this season were held to be stronger than Al Nassr last time around. But in the first six games this time, there have already been two defeats with just ten points on the board. The defences don't seem quite as solid. Just 21 goals conceded from 24 last time but already ten from six this.

It gives hope to the rest. Teams from the UAE, for example, who have started well. Sharjah won the second-tier AFC Champions League Two in May and despite losing coach Cosmin Olaroiu to the national team, replaced by former Red Star Belgrade manager Milos Milojevic, are also looking decent. Shabab Al Ahli and Al Wahda can also take heart from the opening stages.

Over in the eastern group – the two pools are split geographically – the situation is fluid, with Japanese and South Korean teams starting well. Jesse Lingard has played in the UEFA version, and the former Manchester United star is enjoying the Asian edition so far, inspiring FC Seoul to a fine 3-0 win over Buriram United of Thailand.

The other team from Southeast Asia, Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT), have seen their chances hit after three of their players were suspended for 12 months by FIFA, caught up in an embarrassing situation for the Malaysia national team. The world governing body said in September that documents relating to the eligibility of seven naturalised players – born in the Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina and Spain – had been doctored or falsified. It has become a massive issue in the country with the Malaysian FA already stating its intention to appeal the decision,

> Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante and Fabinho have all won European titles, but are finding that Asia's top-tier tournament is no walk in the park

Update

Slow start... Al Ittihad captain Karim Benzema

Perfect start ...Japanese champions Vissel Kobe won their first two games

claiming the discrepancies arose from an "administrative error" and the players were "legitimate Malaysian citizens". But, at a club level, it is a big problem for JDT.

Elsewhere, Melbourne City don't look like improving Australia's dismal recent record, with no goals and no points from their first two games.

Over in the second-tier competition, the imaginatively named AFC Champions League Two, the major story is Mohun Bagan of India being eliminated after just one game. For the second season in succession, the Kolkata club refused to go and play in Iran, citing safety issues. That this was announced just a few days before the game with Sepahan was supposed to take place did not go down well in Iran, with officials pointing out that other teams from around Asia have no problems.

Once more, the AFC said that the team was deemed to have withdrawn from the tournament. They may not get a third opportunity, as there is now talk of a lengthy ban for the team.

Meanwhile, Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr are looking the most likely after a strong start, even though the 40-year-old was rested for the first two games. It looks like he may not be needed until the knockout stages.

Australia

MIKE TUCKERMAN

A-League shrinks

Western United will sit out the 2025-26 campaign, while reigning champions Melbourne City aim to retain their title

Title holders... Melbourne City

Having been hit with a FIFA transfer embargo following a payment dispute with former striker Aleksandar Prijovic, the full scale of Western United's financial woes was laid bare in May when the majority of the club's men's and women's players served breach-of-contract notices for unpaid wages.

But it was the collapse of a proposed takeover by US investment firm KAM Sports that forced the Australian Professional Leagues, the league's governing body, to take drastic action.

Faced with the task of finalising fixtures for both the men's and women's competitions, where stadium availability remains a perennial concern, the APL opted to place the club from Melbourne's western suburbs into hibernation.

The decision allows Western United to mount a lengthy appeals process and potentially return to action next season after the Federal Court elected to place the club into liquidation over reported debts of almost AU$18 million. But critics believe more should have been done sooner. "This matter should have been dealt with in May," said Beau Busch, joint head of the players' union.

Western United's exclusion means the A-League reverts to a 12-team competition, with Melbourne City well placed to defend their title.

The reigning champions have lost last season's grand final goalscorer Yonatan Cohen, but coach Aurelio Vidmar has moulded a squad stacked with young talents and experienced veterans. New signings Takeshi Kanamori and Elbasan Rashani will be expected to plug the gap left by the departures of Cohen and former Celtic loanee Marco Tilio.

Melbourne Victory fans will hope an influx of new signings can take their side one step further than last season's grand final defeat. Head coach Arthur Diles has repatriated highly-rated midfielder Louis D'Arrigo, ex-Melbourne City man Denis Genreau and popular defender Jason Davidson from Europe, while 37-year-old new arrival Juan Mata will hope to see more game time after the former Spain World Cup and European Championship-winning playmaker barely featured for Western Sydney Wanderers.

At one stage last season, Auckland FC looked like they would romp to the championship in their first-ever A-League campaign, only to fall to Melbourne Victory in the semi-finals. Coach Steve Corica will be determined to avoid a similar fate in his second season in charge, and he's signed a familiar face in former Sydney FC defender Jake Girdwood-Reich on loan from MLS outfit St Louis City.

But it's the additions of New Zealand international keeper Oli Sail and English striker Sam Cosgrove that could make the difference for the Kiwis, with the pair arriving as replacements for departed duo Alex Paulsen and Neyder Moreno.

After reaching the finals for the first time since 2017, Western Sydney Wanderers will be looking to better

> **Western United's exclusion means the A-League reverts to a 12-team competition, with Melbourne City well placed to defend their title**

Preview

their elimination final exit this time around. They've picked up a couple of proven A-League performers in Kosta Barbarouses and the returning Steven Ugarkovic, while the signing of free agent Angus Thurgate, most recently of Western United, is a real coup.

Sydney FC coach Ufuk Talay starts the new campaign under real pressure after his side failed to qualify for last season's finals. Worse still is the news that their expensively rented Allianz Stadium home is unavailable until January, after the New South Wales government decided the start of the new A-League season was the ideal time to relay the pitch. It makes the loss of marquee man Douglas Costa, who has returned to Brazil for "legal and personal matters" according to the club, sting all the more.

It's all change at Adelaide United, after long-serving head coach Carl Veart stepped down at the end of last season. He has been replaced by his ex-assistant Airton Andrioli, while the Reds have brought Socceroos winger Craig Goodwin back for a fourth spell at the club to offset the loss of midfielders Stefan Mauk and Zach Clough.

Macarthur FC have strengthened with the additions of ex-Sydney FC playmaker Anthony Caceres and former Melbourne Victory defender Damien Da Silva, however much will depend on how forwards Sime Grzan, Rafael Duran Martinez and Ji Dong-won adjust to life on the league's notoriously hard pitches.

In hibernation... Western United's Ironbark Fields home

Melbourne Victory new boy...Juan Mata

After years in the doldrums, the Newcastle Jets appointed a new coach in Mark Milligan and promptly battled their way to glory in the Australia Cup, beating underdogs Heidelberg United 3-1 after extra-time in the final. Much-travelled Irish defender Joe Shaughnessy and former Sydney FC playmaker Max Burgess are their biggest signings.

The Central Coast Mariners have lost a host of key players, meaning coach Mark Jackson could find the going tough once again this season, while Wellington Phoenix tactician Giancarlo Italiano is tasked with improving on last season's disappointing 11th-place finish.

Brisbane Roar could be the big improvers under new coach Michael Valkanis, having added the likes of goalkeeper Dean Bouzanis, Bosnian youth international Milorad Stajic and English striker Chris Long to their squad.

More is also expected of a Perth Glory side that finished bottom of the standings for the third time in four seasons, with coach David Zdrilic bringing in English defender Scott Wootton and ex-Central Coast Mariners stalwart Brian Kaltak to help strengthen his side's spine.

United States

JAMES NALTON

Nashville triumph in US Open Cup

MLS outfit lift the domestic cup, but debates continue to rage about how the competition fits in the US Soccer landscape

Review

The US Open Cup's place in American soccer, and by extension in American sport, was up for discussion once again as Nashville SC emerged triumphant in the 2025 edition, narrowly defeating Austin FC 2-1 in the final in Texas.

The victory was touted as the first major trophy in any sport in the state of Tennessee, which raised questions around what constitutes a "major" in American sports and around the prestige of the Open Cup itself.

In the national media outside of soccer circles, Major League Soccer is not always considered alongside the other major men's professional leagues of NFL, MLB, the NBA and the NHL. If football's top division is left out of such debates, then what chance does the domestic cup have of being taken more seriously?

Top scorer...Nashville's English striker Sam Surridge celebrates scoring in the final against Austin FC

First-ever trophy... Nashville players lift the US Open Cup

Even within soccer, there is a debate about whether the Open Cup itself is a major trophy. In the rest of the world, a domestic cup obviously holds that status, but in the landscape of American sports, where league titles are decided by post-season play-offs rather than league table standings and accompanying cup competitions are unusual, the Open Cup, despite being a 111-year-old tournament, is still finding its place.

The Open Cup, alongside the newer but similarly organised Canadian Championship (more on page 86), is one of the most unique and inclusive competitions in all of American sports, as it includes teams from the amateur and semi-pro levels all the way up to the top professional divisions.

The unheralded depth of soccer in the United States goes all the way down to the local level, from states to cities and individual communities. The breadth of clubs this includes means that qualification for next year's tournament needs to begin before the current one has ended. The first round of the 2026 Open Cup qualification had already been completed even before the 2025 semi-finals had taken place, and pre-qualification began much earlier.

MLS introduced its own form of qualification in 2025, although in reality this was simply a way of withdrawing several teams from the domestic cup for the second season running. It was more an assignment of teams to various tournaments rather than a qualification. MLS teams are not allowed to play in more than two cup competitions, and with the CONCACAF Champions Cup and Leagues Cup also to consider, plus the fact that the three Canadian teams are ineligible, there were only so many of the league's 30 clubs left to compete in the Open Cup.

After everything was weighed up, only 16 MLS teams were allowed to take part, meaning Los Angeles FC were unable to defend their title, San Diego FC were denied entry to the Open Cup in their debut season, and the cup once again missed out on the additional coverage that Lionel Messi's Inter Miami bring with them to any tournament.

The Open Cup is one of the most unique and inclusive competitions in all of American sports

Their loss was Nashville's gain, and the team's victory was shared with the city and the state of Tennessee. Though the Nashville Predators NHL team won the Presidents' Trophy for having the best overall record in the 2017-18 season, in hockey, that is considered more of an award than a championship.

Nashville's English forward Sam Surridge finished as the top scorer in the tournament with six goals, thanks mostly to a hat-trick in the semi-final against Philadelphia Union. He also scored the winner in the final from the penalty spot after Albania international Myrto Uzuni had cancelled out Hany Mukhtar's opener in the first half.

At the other end of the pitch, goalkeeper Brian Schwake, who is yet to make an MLS appearance for Nashville, was named Man of the Match thanks to seven saves that included a penalty stop from Uzuni.

For the second year running, El Farolito SC, the team named after a chain of burrito restaurants and boasting a group of ultras called the Burrito Brava, won the prize for being the amateur team to progress the furthest, claiming a $50,000 bonus, up from $25,000 in 2024.

Pittsburgh Riverhounds won the same amount for being the USL Championship team to advance the furthest, but their presence as the only USL side in the last 16 was disappointing for the league as a whole. The country's second tier would have been hoping to put up a much stronger challenge against MLS as it moves towards being considered a major league in its own right in the coming years.

Nashville SC will now hope that they get to defend this major title next season, for their supporters, for the city, and for the state of Tennessee but, at this stage, there are no guarantees.

Man of the match...Nashville keeper Brian Schwake impressed in the final at the Q2 Stadium in Texas

Canada

DANNY LEWIS

The first Vancouver derby

The final of the Canadian Championship pitted Vancouver Whitecaps of MLS against Canadian Premier League side Vancouver FC

Vancouver Whitecaps defeated Vancouver FC 4-2 in the final of the Canadian Championship, becoming only the second club to win the competition in four consecutive seasons.

The Championship features teams from across the Canadian soccer system, including the country's three MLS representatives, the eight teams from the Canadian Premier League (CPL) and the champions of the four regional semi-professional leagues that make up League1 Canada.

Although the two finalists are close geographically – the game was dubbed the "604 Derby" in reference to the city's phone code – they've been at opposite ends of Canada's professional football spectrum this season. While the Whitecaps reached the CONCACAF Champions Cup final in June and are still in contention to win the MLS regular season, VFC sat rock bottom of the CPL.

Yet that gap was bridged as they met for the very first time, with the Eagles becoming only the second-ever CPL side to reach this stage of the competition.

In the build-up to the final, there was plenty of fascination at an all-Vancouver meeting. It was seen as a historic match

Canada's finest... Whitecaps players lift the trophy

not just for the two teams but also for the city itself, the province of British Columbia and Canadian soccer. Any CPL team making the final would have gained attention, but the local aspect and their contrasting fortunes added to the narrative.

The local element was underlined by the fact that so many of the VFC starting XI had previously played for the Whitecaps, including Nicolas Mezquida, Elage Bah, Callum Irving, Matteo Campagna, Vasco Fry and Terran Campbell, as well as manager Martin Nash.

Yet, while calling on fired-up locals can be helpful in a derby, the Whitecaps could turn to seasoned internationals and they wasted no time in asserting their dominance. Within five minutes, Canada winger and tournament MVP Ali Ahmed had opened the scoring with a nice touch and pinpoint finish. Four minutes later, he won a penalty that was clinically converted by Germany legend Thomas Muller.

Formed as recently as 2022, VFC were already significant underdogs for the game. As well as performing poorly in the league, they had never won a Canadian Championship match before this season, eliminated in the first round of both the 2023 and 2024 campaigns.

They didn't exactly tear up trees on the road to this final either, narrowly coming through the first two rounds on penalties – against Pacific and Cavalry – and then seeing off a third fellow CPL outfit Atletico Ottawa 3-2 on aggregate in the semi-finals. The meeting with the Caps was their first-ever clash with an MLS side.

Still, they refused to give up and struck back in the 35th minute when Mezquida played a perfectly-weighted ball through that Bah poked home to offer some hope.

However, that ray of light was extinguished almost immediately. Ahmed pounced on a loose ball before notching his second, and the game as a contest was virtually over before half-time.

Although the two finalists are close geographically, they've been at opposite ends of Canada's professional football spectrum this season

The MLS side had a moment to savour late on when Ryan Gauld, back after a lengthy lay-off with a serious knee injury, scored just four minutes after being brought on as a substitute – his first appearance since March.

Vancouver then had another memorable moment of their own as Mezquida applied a brilliant finish to Bah's cutback, adding some respectability to the scoreline.

When these sides will next meet again competitively will come down to the luck of the draw, but a clear message from this four-peat is that any Canadian team will struggle to keep up with Jesper Sorensen's side on current form.

On paper, this year's Championship was a good step forward for the CPL, with a representative in the final and an unprecedented three semi-finalists, but the draw provided some mitigation for that.

The first two rounds are split into east and west, and an MLS club was guaranteed to be knocked out in the first round when Toronto hosted Montreal, with the latter eventually winning on penalties. Meanwhile in the west, as holders, the Whitecaps received a bye through the first round.

If anyone was going to fly the flag for the CPL, it was always likely to be Forge, and the league's most successful side claimed a notable scalp by defeating Montreal 3-2 across two legs in the quarter-finals.

In the semis, they continued to hint that the gap to the MLS sides might not be so wide by holding the Whitecaps to a 2-2 draw at home in the first leg, but were then humbled 4-0 in the second leg at BC Place.

Forge, the only previous CPL side to reach the final – they lost to Toronto on penalties in 2020 – might argue that in a one-off game they can match any of the MLS sides. But for now, there can be no disputing the fact that the Whitecaps are comfortably Canada's finest.

Vancouver derby ...Vancouver FC's Elage Bah runs into the Whitecaps' Mathias Laborda

Dream comeback...Scotland's Ryan Gauld celebrates his late goal after a lengthy injury lay-off

South America

TIM VICKERY

5 Things...

...from the latter stages of the Copas Libertadores and Sudamericana

Semi-finalists... Palmeiras and Flamengo both played at the Club World Cup in the summer

1 ANOTHER ALL-BRAZILIAN LIBERTADORES FINAL?

A Flamengo v Palmeiras final looked a fair bet when the Copa Libertadores kicked off – and it still looks that way going into the semi-finals. Part of the prolonged domination by Brazilian clubs (six straight wins) is the contribution of foreign players, lured by high salaries on offer. Flamengo kicked off the first leg of their quarter-final against Estudiantes with six non-Brazilians in the starting line-up, while Palmeiras had four plus two coming off the bench in both legs against River Plate. And the Argentine clubs paid the price of facing Argentine talent. Flamengo keeper Agustin Rossi came up big in the shootout against Estudiantes, while River Plate were undone by striker "Flaco" Lopez.

2 RACING DREAMING OF THE BIGGEST PRIZE

A fanatical follower of Racing, Gustavo Costas was a defender for the Argentine club when they were triumphant in the Supercopa Libertadores in 1988. That was a competition reserved for teams that had previously won the Libertadores, which Racing did all the way back in 1967, but there has been little continental success otherwise.

Last year, when he began his third spell as head coach of the club, he promised that Racing would finally get back to winning international trophies – and he has delivered. In 2024, they won the Sudamericana, following it up early this year with the Recopa (the clash against the Libertadores champions). Both these titles came against Brazilian opposition – excellent practice for the toughest challenge yet, the clash v Flamengo in the semi-finals. Whatever happens, Costas will live the games in his own intense manner, kicking every ball and celebrating goals like a man possessed.

Man on a mission... Racing head coach Gustavo Costas

3 STRIKERS AT A PREMIUM

Kevin Viveros is another example of Brazil's domination. In the group stage, he proved the cutting edge of Atletico Nacional in his native Colombia. But in the middle of the year, he was lured away by Athletico Paranaense in Brazil's second division. The lack of their centre-forward cost Nacional dear in their round-of-16 tie against Sao Paulo, where they were unable to take advantage of their superiority and went out on penalties. But then it was Sao Paulo's turn to

Lured away... Atletico Nacional lost Kevin Viveros to Athletico Paranaense

suffer from the lack of a centre-forward. They suffered an untimely injury crisis in the position ahead of the quarter-finals, and were eliminated by LDU of Ecuador without managing a goal in either game.

4 MISERLY LDU MAKE HISTORY

LDU conceded a goal after just 13 seconds of their first knockout-round game. But they went through the rest of that match, plus the next three, without conceding any more, knocking out reigning champions Botafogo and then winning home and away against Sao Paulo. Even bearing in mind the advantage of the altitude of Quito, this is a massively impressive achievement, and underlines the extent to which Ecuadorian football has been a recent success story. Since the Libertadores switched to the current year-long format in 2017, all of the semi-finalists have come from Brazil or Argentina – with the exception of Uruguay's Penarol last year and the Ecuadorians. Barcelona, from sea level at Guayaquil, have done it twice, and they are now joined by compatriots LDU.

> Part of the prolonged domination by Brazilian clubs (six straight Libertadores wins) is the contribution of foreign players

5 ANOTHER INDEPENDIENTE DEL VALLE MIRACLE

That Ecuadorian success has also been on display in the Copa Sudamericana. LDU won the trophy in 2023, while near neighbours Independiente del Valle were victorious in both 2019 and 2022. And the remarkable club from the outskirts of Quito, the breeding ground of almost the entire Ecuador national team, are at it again, after taking the scenic route to the semi-finals.

In the last 16 they needed a goal in the tenth minute of stoppage time to force a penalty shootout and knock out compatriots Mushuc Runa. Then, in the quarter-finals, they lost the first leg 2-0 at home to Colombia's Once Caldas with both goals coming from 40-year-old striker Dayro Moreno, recently recalled to the national team. But del Valle's marksman is equally remarkable. California-born Michael Hoyos came through the youth ranks in Argentina, but his career seemed to be over after suffering a serious car accident in 2011. He recovered, and has spent the last eight years in Ecuador. He got the equaliser against Mushuc Runa and two more against Once Caldas to force another penalty shootout. They won that one too, and now take on Brazil's Atletico Mineiro for a place in November's final against either Lanus of Argentina or Universidad de Chile.

Clean sheet specialist... LDU goalkeeper Gonzalo Valle

Remarkable club...players of Independiente del Valle celebrate reaching the Sudamericana semi-finals

Vatican City

STEVE MENARY

Football in the Holy See

A new season is ready to begin in the Vatican after the previous campaign was interrupted

Spectacular views...St Peter's Dome overlooks the Vatican football pitch

The 2025-26 Vatican League is due to start in November with organisers hoping for an upturn in the number of entries after the previous season was disrupted by the death of Pope Francis.

First staged in the early 1970s, the competition for workers and residents of the Vatican City – the world's smallest state – has featured as many as 11 sides in the past. The 2024-25 season was delayed for a period of mourning and games got underway in March but the number of entrants was reduced to eight with famous names missing, such as the side from the Swiss Guard.

Nicola Vignola, president of the Vatican League, explains: "This year, unfortunately for the championship, several teams dropped out due to their active participation in the Catholic Church's Universal Jubilee. Consequently, in order not to miss their commitments, they decided not to participate."

Entrants last season included Dirseco, which represents the Directorate of the Economy at the Vatican State, and sides drawn from the Apostolic Archives (Archivio), the Museum (Musei) and the Pharmacy (Farmacia).

Vatican women ...players of the women's national team

Teams also took part from Collegio Urbano, the Catholic seminary set up in 1627 to train priests, and the Association of Saints Peter and Paul (Ass.SS.PP), the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir (Coro Sistina), and the Primary Catholic Artistic-Workers Association (PACAO).

Most matches are played at the picturesque Cavalieri di Colombo Pio XI Sports Centre, which is just outside the Vatican. The 11-a-side pitch has spectacular views of St Peter's Dome, but the format can vary.

"Regarding league matches, we adapt based on the needs of the registered teams – in recent years, the league has been 5-a-side," adds Mr Vignola. "League matches are usually played every Monday and Tuesday from November to June, depending on the Holy Father's commitments."

After seven rounds, Archivio topped the regular season table and advanced to the play-offs where they edged out fourth-placed Musei on penalties. In the other semi, Farmacia saw off a side drawn from the Association of Saints Peter and Paul. In June's final, Archivio beat Farmacia 7-2 to complete the double after beating Dirseco 4-1 in the final of the annual cup competition, the Coppa Vaticano, on February 26.

The Vatican also fields a representative side, which plays ad hoc games including a number of matches against Monaco, another European micro-state whose tiny population makes UEFA membership and full international participation unlikely. The last matches were against German amateur side KSV Johannisthal, who were thumped 7-1 in Rome in 2023 but won the return in Berlin last year, 3-2. A women's team also played their first game in 2019, although they have only played three more times since then.

> "We nurture this passion for football, but the human aspect comes first"
>
> Nicola Vignola, president of the Vatican League

For now, no more games are currently scheduled for either the men or women.

Mr Vignola says: "Our sporting commitments are tied to each of our work and family commitments. We nurture this passion for football, but the human aspect comes first, so we consider invitations to participate in sports events on a case-by-case basis."

Instead, the Vatican sports society are concentrating on the next league season, which is scheduled to kick off in November.

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Stadio Comunale Ezio Scida... the home of Italian club Crotone

OFF-PITCH MATTERS MAKING HEADLINES IN ITALY'S SERIE C

Italian third-tier club Crotone have been placed under judicial supervision for a year after police found "sufficient evidence" of pervasive mafia infiltration. The powerful 'Ndrangheta syndicate in southern Calabria had reportedly infiltrated the club's security and ticketing operations, prompting the authorities to deem protective measures necessary. In a released statement, the club – who are not under investigation – said the court decision "does not even remotely suggest complicity or connivance by the club, its shareholders, or its managers and collaborators".

It is not an isolated case. Fellow third-tier outfit Foggia are also operating under judicial supervision following investigations to safeguard the sport under Italy's Anti-Mafia Code.

Further north in Italy's third tier, Ternana have made headlines for appointing a 23-year-old with no prior football experience as their new club president. Claudia Rizzo, the daughter of billionaire businessman and club owner Gianluigi Rizzo, previously managed the family's olive oil production plant in Sicily. The Rizzo family bought the club from Stefano D'Alessandro, who last season sacked former coach Ignazio Abate for omitting his son Mattya from the squad, then performed an immediate U-turn and re-appointed him following a player revolt.

EX-FOOTBALLER BECOMES MP

Within the space of just 12 months, Maxim Potirniche has gone from playing European football to becoming a member of the Moldovan Parliament. The former defender helped Petrocub Hincesti end Sheriff Tiraspol's eight-year stranglehold on Moldova's Super Liga in 2024 and then made four Conference League appearances later that year, before hanging up his boots in January. He has since moved into politics and become an MP for the pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which won the election that was held in September this year.

The most famous example of a footballer entering politics is former Milan forward and Ballon d'Or winner George Weah, who served as Liberian president from 2018 to 2024 and whose inauguration was attended by fellow African legends Samuel Eto'o and Didier Drogba. He was the second former footballer to become a head of state, after Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella in 1963. More recently, former Dinamo Tbilisi and Manchester City defender Mikheil Kavelashvili was sworn in as Georgia's president in December 2024.

ANDORRAN LEAGUE LEFT IN LIMBO

Following in the footsteps of the Indian Super League (more on page 58), the Andorran top flight has also been forced to delay the start of the 2025-26 season. Scheduled to begin in September, it has been delayed by more than a month at the time of writing.

The postponement came about because the country's immigration quota was exhausted, leaving more than 80 footballers without the required permits and seven of the ten clubs without enough players. To circumvent the same problem next season, a special visa is reportedly set to be introduced for athletes, who currently have to adhere to the same rules as everyone else.

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Ahrotekh Tyshkivka v Feniks-Mariupol
Ukrainian Cup, October, 28
Fourth-tier Ahrotekh Tyshkivka have become the first-ever amateur team to reach the last 16 of the Ukrainian Cup. After defeating Premier League side Epitsentr Kamianets-Podilskyi and two-time cup winners Chornomorets Odesa, both on penalties, they will host second-tier outfit Feniks-Mariupol next.

Pafos v Villarreal
Champions League, November 5
Two of the smallest places represented in the 2025-26 UEFA Champions League will meet on Matchday 4 of the league phase. With a local population of 37,991, Pafos hail from the smallest town or city in this season's competition, although Villarreal's hometown is only marginally bigger with 52,523 people.

Machida Zelvia v FC Tokyo
Japanese Cup, November 16
Machida Zelvia were down in Japan's seventh tier 20 years ago and have a coach, Go Kuroda, whose only previous experience was at high-school level. Now they are targeting a first-ever major trophy in the Emperor's Cup, with FC Tokyo their opponents at the semi-final stage.

Chasing history...Machida Zelvia supporters

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Club Football

WORLD

2025 FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

African–Asian–Pacific Cup Play-Off

Sep 14 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (El Karti 14, Hamdy 74, Ziko 85)
Auckland City (Nzl) 0

African–Asian–Pacific Cup

Sep 23 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Toney 45 pen)
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (Mayele 21, 71, 75)

EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Sep 16 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Martinelli 72, Trossard 87)

Sep 16 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Van Bommel 90)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 3 (David 9 pen, Ait El Hadj 39, Mac Allister 81)

Sep 16 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 4 (Yildiz 63, Vlahovic 67, 90+4, Kelly 90+6)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 4 (Adeyemi 52, Nmecha 65, Couto 74, Bensebaini 86 pen)

Sep 16 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Mbappe 29 pen, 81 pen)
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Weah 22)

Sep 16 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 2 (Barrenechea 6, Pavlidis 16)
Qarabag (Aze) 3 (Andrade 30, Duran 48, Kashchuk 86)

Sep 16 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 1 (Luiz Junior 4 og)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Sep 17 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 0
Pafos (Cyp) 0

Sep 17 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Mbodji 23, 74)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Bassi 78, Brunstad Fet 90)

Sep 17 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Thuram 42, 47)

Sep 17 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 3 (Chalobah 20 og, Kane 27 pen, 63)
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Palmer 29)

Sep 17 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 3 (Robertson 4, Salah 6, Van Dijk 90+2)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Llorente 45+3, 81)

Sep 17 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Marquinhos 3, Kvaratskhelia 39, Mendes 51, Ramos 90+1)
Atalanta (Ita) 0

Sep 18 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 4 (Tresoldi 32, Onyedika 39, Vanaken 42, Diakhon 75)
Monaco (Fra) 1 (Fati 90+1)

Sep 18 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 2 (Larsson 9, Robert 87)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Grimaldo 82, Hatzidiakos 90+1 og)

Sep 18 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 5 (Sanchez 37 og, Uzun 45+2, Burkardt 45+4, 66, Knauff 75)
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Akgun 8)

Sep 18 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 56, Doku 65)
Napoli (Ita) 0

Sep 18 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Gordon 90)
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Rashford 58, 67)

Sep 18 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 4 (Trincao 44, 65, Alisson 67, Quenda 68)
Kairat (Kaz) 1 (Edmilson 86)

Matchday 2

Sep 30 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Samardzic 74 pen, Pasalic 87)
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Tzolis 38)

Sep 30 – Almaty
Kairat (Kaz) 0
Real Madrid (Spa) 5 (Mbappe 25 pen, 52, 73, Camavinga 83, Brahim 90+3)

Sep 30 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 5 (Raspadori 4, Le Normand 33, Griezmann 45+1, Simeone 70, Alvarez 82 pen)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Burkardt 57)

Sep 30 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Rios 18 og)
Benfica (Por) 0

Sep 30 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 3 (Lautaro 30, 65, Dumfries 34)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0

Sep 30 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Hauge 53, 66)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Van de Ven 68, Gundersen 89 og)

Sep 30 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Osimhen 16 pen)
Liverpool (Eng) 0

Sep 30 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 4 (Paixao 6, 12, Greenwood 26, Aubameyang 52)
Ajax (Ned) 0

Sep 30 – Pafos
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Orsic 45)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 5 (Kane 15, 34, Guerreiro 20, Jackson 31, Olise 68)

Oct 1 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Zoubir 28, Addai 83)
Copenhagen (Den) 0

Oct 1 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0
Newcastle United (Eng) 4 (Woltemade 17, Gordon 43 pen, 64 pen, Barnes 80)

Oct 1 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Martinelli 12, Saka 90+2)
Olympiacos (Gre) 0

Oct 1 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Teze 18, Dier 90 pen)
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 15, 44)

Oct 1 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Kofane 65)
PSV (Ned) 1 (Saibari 72)

Oct 1 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 4 (Svensson 28, Chukwuemeka 50, Guirassy 82, Brandt 90+1)
Athletic Club (Spa) 1 (Guruzeta 61)

Oct 1 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Torres 19)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Mayulu 38, Ramos 90)

Oct 1 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Hojlund 36, 79)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Suarez 62 pen)

Oct 1 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 2 (Mikautadze 18, Veiga 90)
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Gatti 49, Conceicao 56)

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Sep 24 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Christensen 7 og, Diao 88)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0

Sep 24 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 0
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0

Sep 24 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Arnautovic 65)
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Iheanacho 55)

Sep 24 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3 (Beljo 21, 50, Bakrar 90+5)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Szymanski 25)

Sep 24 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 1 (Berg Johnsen 78)
Ludogorets (Bul) 2 (Stanic 8 pen, Bile 23)

Sep 24 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 1 (Moffi 77 pen)
Roma (Ita) 2 (Ndicka 52, Mancini 55)

Sep 24 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Bakambu 15, Antony 85)
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 2 (Igor Jesus 18, 23)

Sep 24 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Navarro 79)
Feyenoord (Ned) 0

Sep 24 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 2 (Osterhage 31, Eggestein 57)
Basel (Sui) 1 (Otele 84)

Sep 25 – Deventer
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 0
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Miculescu 13)

Sep 25 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 2 (Igamane 54, Giroud 80)
Brann (Nor) 1 (Magnusson 60)

Sep 25 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (McGinn 13)
Bologna (Ita) 0

Sep 25 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Janko 25)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 4 (Swiderski 10, Zaroury 13, 19, 68)

Sep 25 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Porto (Por) 1 (William Gomes 90+3)

Sep 25 – Utrecht
Utrecht (Ned) 0
Lyon (Fra) 1 (Tessmann 75)

Sep 25 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Pesic 90+4)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Durosinmi 16)

Sep 25 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 0
Genk (Bel) 1 (Oh Hyeon-gyu 55)

Sep 25 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 2 (Bouanani 51, El Khannouss 68)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Iglesias 86)

Matchday 2

Oct 2 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 0
Lille (Fra) 1 (Haraldsson 6)

Oct 2 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Orsolini 29)
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Adamu 57 pen)

Oct 2 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 0
Braga (Por) 2 (Horta 20, Martinez 85)

Oct 2 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 3 (Vydra 34, Durosinmi 44, Spacil 53)
Malmo (Swe) 0

Oct 2 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Akturkoglu 3, 25)
Nice (Fra) 1 (Kevin Carlos 37 pen)

Oct 2 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 0
Young Boys (Sui) 2 (Monteiro 11, 36)

Oct 2 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Swiderski 55)
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 2 (Smit 75, 82)

Oct 2 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 0
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Lo Celso 31, Son 53 og)

Oct 2 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 1 (Magnusson 41)
Utrecht (Ned) 0

Oct 2 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 2 (Ajeti 3, Shaqiri 84)
Stuttgart (Ger) 0

Oct 2 – Porto
Porto (Por) 2 (William Gomes 8 pen, Mora 89)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Kostov 32)

Oct 2 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 0
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Buendia 61, McGinn 79)

Oct 2 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 0
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Varga 44)

Oct 2 – Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1 (Abu Farchi 14)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3 (Lisica 16, Ljubicic 19, 72)

Oct 2 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 2 (Ndoye 22, Wood 90+3 pen)
Midtjylland (Den) 3 (Diao 18, Bech 24, Byskov 88)

Oct 2 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Satriano 11, Kluivert 57)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0

Oct 2 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 3 (Aspas 45+2, Iglesias 53, Swedberg 70)
PAOK (Gre) 1 (Giakoumakis 37)

Oct 2 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 2 (Horvat 7, Kiteishvili 35)
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Gassama 49)

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Oct 2 – Lublin
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Munoz 31, Nketiah 58)

Oct 2 – Lausanne
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 3 (Lekoueiry 7, Bair 11, Diakite 33)
Breidablik (Isl) 0

Oct 2 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 1 (Mulahusejnovic 6)
Rijeka (Cro) 0

Oct 2 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 5 (Bilbija 12, Dujmovic 22, Jakovljevic 40, Damascan 69, Mikic 85)
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0

Oct 2 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Imaz 57)
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0

Oct 2 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 4 (Palma 13, Ishak 21, Ismaheel 45+2, Bengtsson 77)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Radulovic 64)

Oct 2 – Tampere
KuPS (Fin) 1 (Parzyszek 74)
Drita (Kos) 1 (Dabiqaj 80)

Oct 2 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 0
Mainz (Ger) 1 (Amiri 75 pen)

Oct 2 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 2 (Lopez 28, Perez 32)
Shkendija (Mkd) 0

Oct 2 – Aberdeen
Aberdeen (Sco) 2 (Karlsson 8 pen, Devlin 69)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Nazaryna 39, Ferreira 54, Pedrinho 60)

Oct 2 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 4 (Sadilek 33, Suchomel 44, Sorensen 50, Haraslin 90)
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Mandroiu 82)

Oct 2 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Piccoli 27, Ndour 90+5)
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 0

Oct 2 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 4 (Rubio 25, Bajic 54, Ivanovic 73, Rohden 83)
AZ (Ned) 0

Oct 2 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 0
Samsunspor (Tur) 1 (Musaba 10)

Oct 2 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 3 (Kovacevic 34, 55, 80)
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Kutesa 7)

Oct 2 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 2 (Pienko 47, Repka 80)
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 0

Oct 2 – Dublin
Shelbourne (Irl) 0
BK Hacken (Swe) 0

Oct 2 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Ibrahim 64)
Strasbourg (Fra) 2 (Yirajang 26 og, Ouattara 41)

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 16 – Buenos Aires
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 0
Racing (Arg) 1 (Martinez 53)

Sep 17 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Martinez Quarta 89)
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Gomez 6, Vitor Roque 41)

Sep 18 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 2 (Ramirez 15, Estrada 78)
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

Sep 18 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Pedro 1, Varela 9)
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Leo Pereira 90+1 og)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 23 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 1 (Solari 82)
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 0
Racing win 2-0 on aggregate

Sep 24 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 3 (Vitor Roque 51, Lopez 90+1 pen, 90+4)
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Salas 8)
Palmeiras win 5-2 on aggregate

Sep 25 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0
LDU Quito (Ecu) 1 (Medina 41)
LDU Quito win 3-0 on aggregate

Sep 25 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Benedetti 45+2)
Flamengo (Bra) 0
2-2 on aggregate; Flamengo win 4-2 on pens

Semi-Final Draw

Oct 22-23:
Flamengo (Bra) v Racing (Arg);
LDU Quito (Ecu) v Palmeiras (Bra)

Oct 29-30:
Racing (Arg) v Flamengo (Bra);
Palmeiras (Bra) v LDU Quito (Ecu)

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 16 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Moreno 89)
Fluminense (Bra) 0

Sep 17 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Robson Matheus 48, Romero 88 pen)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Alexsander 45, Vitor Hugo 45+6)

Sep 17 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0
Once Caldas (Col) 2 (Moreno 22, 49)

Sep 18 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 0
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 23 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Canobbio 20)
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Aquino 67)
Lanus win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 24 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Bernard 90+1)
Bolivar (Bol) 0
Atletico Mineiro win 3-2 on aggregate

Sep 24 – Manizales
Once Caldas (Col) 0
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Hoyos 27, 51)
2-2 on aggregate;
Independiente del Valle win 5-4 on pens

Sep 25 – Coquimbo
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 2 (Assadi 5, Altamirano 51)
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (E. Castillo 64)
Universidad de Chile win 2-1 on aggregate

Semi-Final Draw

Oct 21-23:
Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
v Atletico Mineiro (Bra);
Universidad de Chile (Chi) v Lanus (Arg)

Oct 28-30:
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) v
Independiente del Valle (Ecu);
Lanus (Arg) v Universidad de Chile (Chi)

CONCACAF

2025 US OPEN CUP

Quarter-Finals

Jul 8-9:
Minnesota United 3-1 Chicago Fire (*AET*);
San Jose Earthquakes 2-2 Austin FC
(*AET, Austin win 4-2 on pens*);
Nashville SC 5-2 D.C. United;

Aug 13:
Philadelphia Union 3-2 New York Red Bulls

Semi-Finals

Sep 16-17:
Nashville SC 3-1 Philadelphia Union;
Minnesota United 1-2 Austin FC (*AET*)

Final

Oct 1 – Texas
Austin FC 1 (Uzuni 45+1)
Nashville SC 2 (Mukhtar 17, Surridge 60 pen)

2025 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 16-18:
Vancouver Whitecaps 4-0 Forge (agg 6-2);
Atletico Ottawa 1-0 Vancouver FC (agg 2-3)

Final

Oct 1 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 4 (Ahmed 5, 36, Muller 10 pen, Gauld 83)
Vancouver FC 2 (Bah 35, Mezquida 85)

2025 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Group A

Sep 16-18:
Central (Tri) 2-0 Moca (Dom);
Robinhood (Sur) 1-3 O&M (Dom)

Sep 23-24:
Central (Tri) 0-2 Mount Pleasant (Jam);
O&M (Dom) 1-2 Moca (Dom)

Sep 30:
Moca (Dom) 0-2 Robinhood (Sur);
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 2-0 O&M (Dom)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mount Pleasant*	4	4	0	0	7	0	12
O&M*	4	2	0	2	6	5	6
Robinhood	4	1	1	2	5	6	4
Central	4	1	1	2	4	6	4
Moca	4	1	0	3	2	7	3

*Advance to next round

Group B

Sep 17-18:
Cavalier (Jam) 2-1 Defence Force (Tri);
Juventus des Cayes (Hai)
1-2 Weymouth Wales (Brb)

Sep 23-25:
Juventus des Cayes (Hai) 0-3 Cibao (Dom);
Defence Force (Tri) 1-1 Weymouth Wales (Brb)

Oct 1:
Weymouth Wales (Brb) 2-1 Cavalier (Jam);
Cibao (Dom) 0-2 Defence Force (Tri)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cibao*	4	3	0	1	7	3	9
Defence Force*	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Weymouth Wales	4	2	1	1	6	5	7
Cavalier	4	1	1	2	4	6	4
Juventus des Cayes	4	0	1	3	2	7	1

*Advance to next round

Semi-Final Draw

Oct 22-23:
Defence Force (Tri) v Mount Pleasant (Jam);
O&M (Dom) v Cibao (Dom)

Oct 29-30:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) v Defence Force (Tri);
Cibao (Dom) v O&M (Dom)

2025 CONCACAF CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Quarter-Finals

Sep 23-25:
Alajuelense (Crc) 0-1 Motagua (Hon);
Real Espana (Hon) 0-1 Plaza Amador (Pan);
Xelaju (Gua) 2-0 Sporting San Miguelito (Pan);
Cartagines (Crc) 1-2 Olimpia (Hon)

Sep 30-Oct 2:
Motagua (Hon) 1-2 Alajuelense (Crc)
(agg 2-2, *Alajuelense win on away goals*);
Plaza Amador (Pan) 1-2 Real Espana (Hon)
(agg 2-2, *Real Espana win on away goals*);
Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 2-1 Xelaju (Gua)
(agg 2-3, *AET*);
Olimpia (Hon) 3-1 Cartagines (Crc) (agg 5-2)

Play-Ins Draw

Oct 21-22:
Cartagines (Crc) v Motagua (Hon);
Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) v Plaza Amador (Pan)

Oct 30:
Motagua (Hon) v Cartagines (Crc);
Plaza Amador (Pan) v Sporting San Miguelito (Pan)

Semi-Final Draw

Oct 22-23:
Real Espana (Hon) v Xelaju (Gua);
Alajuelense (Crc) v Olimpia (Hon)

Oct 29-30:
Xelaju (Gua) v Real Espana (Hon);
Olimpia (Hon) v Alajuelense (Crc)

Final Tables 2025

ST KITTS & NEVIS

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Village Superstars*	18	14	2	2	65	14	44
St Paul's United*	18	12	3	3	51	14	39
Conaree*	18	12	1	5	45	20	37
Cayon*	18	11	3	4	37	13	36
St Peters	18	11	1	6	39	20	34
United Old Road Jets	18	7	6	5	39	15	27
Bath United	18	5	2	11	30	44	17
Sandy Point	18	4	2	12	24	41	14
Mantab United (R)	18	3	2	13	20	73	11
Security Forces United (R)	18	0	0	18	2	98	0

*Advance to next round

Super Four

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Village Superstars*	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
St Paul's United* (C)	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
Conaree	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Cayon	3	1	0	2	3	4	3

*Advance to final

Final

Sep 4:
Village Superstars 0-2 St Paul's United

Sep 7:
St Paul's United 2-0 Village Superstars
(agg 4-0)

ASIA

2025-26 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 1

Sep 15 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 4 (Manaj 60, 90+1, Camara 62, Coronado 90+10)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 3 (Brahimi 33 pen, Joselu 45+4, 73 pen)

Sep 15 – Abu Dhabi
Al Wahda (UAE) 2 (Caio 62, Pimenta 90+8)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Bergwijn 21)

Sep 15 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 1 (D. Mendy 28)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Al Haydos 62)

Sep 15 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 4 (Millot 65, 68, Mahrez 90+4, Sulaiman 90+15)
Nasaf (Uzb) 2 (Norchaev 34, 41)

Sep 16 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1 (Bala 65)
Tractor (Irn) 1 (Strkalj 14)

Sep 16 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Nunez 57, Hernandez 67)
Al Duhail (Qat) 1 (Boulbina 37)

Matchday 2

Sep 29 – Qarshi
Nasaf (Uzb) 2 (Bakhromov 27, Sidikov 60)
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Milinkovic-Savic 21, Hernandez 45+2, Marcos Leonardo 79)

Sep 29 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 2 (Joselu 48, Sassi 54)
Al Shorta (Irq) 0

Sep 29 – Tabriz
Tractor (Irn) 0
Al Wahda (UAE) 0

Sep 29 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 2 (Edmilson Junior 25, Piatek 48)
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Matheus Goncalves 42, Mahrez 45+1)

Sep 30 – Al Rayyan
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Afif 18)
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Lucas 73)

Sep 30 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 0
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1 (Ezatolahi 40)

East Region

Matchday 1

Sep 16 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 0
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 2 (Junior 52 pen, Nakajima 81)

Sep 16 – Chuncheon
Gangwon FC (Kor) 2 (Hong Chul 54, Goo Bon-cheul 63)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 1 (Teixeira 45+1)

Sep 16 – Machida
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 1 (Mochizuki 80)
FC Seoul (Kor) 1 (Dugandzic 59)

Sep 16 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Suphanat 50, R. Zulj 54)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 1 (Cristian 28)

Sep 17 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 2 (Um Won-sang 76, Heo Yool 90+5)
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 1 (Delgado 44)

Sep 17 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 3 (Erik 20, Miyashiro 41, Osako 45)

Matchday 2

Sep 30 – Hiroshima
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Araki 19)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 1 (Gabrielzinho 83)

Sep 30 – Seoul
FC Seoul (Kor) 3 (Choi Jun 38, Jeong Seung-won 45+3, Rodrigues 68)
Buriram United (Tha) 0

Sep 30 – Chengdu
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 1 (Chow 35)
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0

Sep 30 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 0

Oct 1 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 1 (Yuruki 90+4)
Melbourne City (Aus) 0

Oct 1 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 1 (Nlavo 48)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Ludwigson 62)

2025-26 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Group A

Sep 17:
Al Wasl (UAE) 7-1 Esteghlal (Irn);
Al Muharraq (Bhr) 4-0 Al Wehdat (Jor)

Oct 1:
Esteghlal (Irn) 0-1 Al Muharraq (Bhr);
Al Wehdat (Jor) 1-2 Al Wasl (UAE)

Group B

Sep 17:
Arkadag (Tkm) 0-0 Andijon (Uzb);
Al Ahli (Qat) 0-0 Al Khaldiya (Bhr)

Oct 1:
Andijon (Uzb) 0-0 Al Ahli (Qat);
Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 2-0 Arkadag (Tkm)

Group C

Sep 16:
Mohun Bagan (Ind) 0-1* Ahal (Tkm)
**Result voided;*
Mohun Bagan considered withdrawn
Al Hussein (Jor) 1-0 Sepahan (Irn)

Sep 30:
Ahal (Tkm) 1-4 Al Hussein (Jor);
Sepahan (Irn) – Mohun Bagan (Ind)
Match cancelled;
Mohun Bagan considered withdrawn

Group D

Sep 17:
Goa (Ind) 0-2 Al Zawraa (Irq);
Al Nassr (KSA) 5-0 Istiklol (Tjk)

Oct 1:
Istiklol (Tjk) 2-0 Goa (Ind);
Al Zawraa (Irq) 0-2 Al Nassr (KSA)

East Region

Group E

Sep 18:
Tai Po (Hkg) 2-1 Macarthur (Aus);
Beijing Guoan (Chn) 2-2 Cong An Ha Noi (Vie)

Oct 2:
Macarthur (Aus) 3-0 Beijing Guoan (Chn);
Cong An Ha Noi (Vie) 3-0 Tai Po (Hkg)

Group F

Sep 17:
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 3-1 Eastern (Hkg);
Nam Dinh (Vie) 3-1 Ratchaburi (Tha)

Oct 2:
Eastern (Hkg) 0-1 Nam Dinh (Vie);
Ratchaburi (Tha) 0-2 Gamba Osaka (Jpn)

Group G

Sep 18:
Selangor (Mas) 2-4 Bangkok United (Tha);
Persib Bandung (Idn) 1-1 Lion City Sailors (Sgp)

Oct 1:
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 4-2 Selangor (Mas);
Bangkok United (Tha) 0-2 Persib Bandung (Idn)

Group H

Sep 18:
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 0-3 Tampines Rovers (Sgp);
BG Pathum Utd (Tha) 0-1 Pohang Steelers (Kor)

Oct 2:
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 2-0 Kaya–Iloilo (Phi);
Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 2-1 BG Pathum Utd (Tha)

2025 AUSTRALIA CUP

Final

Oct 4 – Melbourne
Heidelberg United 1 (Lethlean 8)
Newcastle Jets 3 (Burgess 22, Fryer 96, Gibson 115)
After Extra-Time

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

First Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Sep 16:
Cote d'Or (Sey) 0-2 Stade d'Abidjan (Civ)

Sep 19:
Dadje (Ben) 0-0 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby);
Wiliete (Ang) 0-3 Young Africans (Tan);
African Stars (Nam) 0-1 Vipers (Uga)

Sep 20:
Ethiopian Insurance (Eth) 2-0 Mlandege (Zan);
Mogadishu City (Som) 1-3 Kenya Police (Ken);
Rahimo (Bfa) 0-0 Mangasport (Gab);
Bibiani Gold Stars (Gha) 0-2 JS Kabylie (Alg);
Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 1-0 Horoya (Gui);
Fassell (Lbr) 0-0 MC Alger (Alg);
Gaborone United (Bot) 0-1 Simba (Tan);
Cercle de Joachim (Mri) 0-3 Petro Atletico (Ang);
Aigles du Congo (Cod) 0-0 Rivers United (Nga);
Power Dynamos (Zam) 1-0 ASEC Mimosas (Civ);
Lioli (Les) 0-3 Orlando Pirates (RSA)

Sep 21:
Aigle Noir (Bdi) 0-0 ASAS Djibouti Telecom (Dji);
Jamus (Ssd) 0-0 Al Hilal Omdurman (Sdn);
AS FAN (Nig) 0-3 Esperance (Tun);
ASC Kara (Tgo) 1-1 RS Berkane (Mar);
East End Lions (Sle) 0-4 US Monastir (Tun);
Fundacion Bata (Eqg) 0-0 FC Nouadhibou (Mtn);
AS Tempete (Cta) 0-5 Stade Malien (Mli);
Real de Banjul (Gam) 0-2 ASFAR (Mar);
Colombe Sportive (Cmr) 0-0 ASC Jaraaf (Sen);
Remo Stars (Nga) 4-0 US Zilimadjou (Com);
Simba Bhora (Zim) 1-0 Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz);
Elgeco Plus (Mad) 1-1 Silver Strikers (Mwi);
AC Leopards (Cgo) 0-0 Black Bulls (Moz)

Sep 27:
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1-0 Al Merrikh (Sdn)

Oct 1:
APR (Rwa) 0-2 Pyramids (Egy)

First Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Sep 24:
Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 3-1 Cote d'Or (Sey) (agg 5-1)

Sep 26:
US Zilimadjou (Com) 0-1 Remo Stars (Nga) (agg 0-5)

Sep 27:
ASAS Djibouti Telecom (Dji) 1-1 Aigle Noir (Bdi) (agg 1-1, *Aigle Noir win on away goals*);
Mlandege (Zan) 3-2 Ethiopian Insurance (Eth) (agg 3-4);
Esperance (Tun) 4-1 AS FAN (Nig) (agg 7-1);
RS Berkane (Mar) 3-1 ASC Kara (Tgo) (agg 4-2);
Stade Malien (Mli) 2-0 AS Tempete (Cta) (agg 7-0);
Horoya (Gui) 2-0 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) (agg 2-1);
ASFAR (Mar) 2-1 Real de Banjul (Gam) (agg 4-1);
MC Alger (Alg) 3-0 Fassell (Lbr) (agg 3-0);
Silver Strikers (Mwi) 0-0 Elgeco Plus (Mad) (agg 1-1, *Silver Strikers win on away goals*);
Young Africans (Tan) 2-0 Wiliete (Ang) (agg 5-0);
Petro Atletico (Ang) 3-0 Cercle de Joachim (Mri) (agg 6-0);
Black Bulls (Moz) 0-0 AC Leopards (Cgo) (agg 0-0, *Black Bulls win 5-4 on pens*);
Vipers (Uga) 1-0 African Stars (Nam) (agg 2-0);
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 4-0 Lioli (Les) (agg 7-0)

Sep 28:
Kenya Police (Ken) 0-2 Mogadishu City (Som) (agg 3-3, *Kenya Police win on away goals*);
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sdn) 1-0 Jamus (Ssd) (agg 1-0);
Mangasport (Gab) 0-0 Rahimo (Bfa) (agg 0-0, *Rahimo win 4-2 on pens*);
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 1-0 Dadje (Ben) (agg 1-0);
US Monastir (Tun) 3-1 East End Lions (Sle) (agg 7-1);
JS Kabylie (Alg) 5-0 Bibiani Gold Stars (Gha) (agg 7-0);
FC Nouadhibou (Mtn) 2-0 Fundacion Bata (Eqg) (agg 2-0);
ASC Jaraaf (Sen) 0-1 Colombe Sportive (Cmr) (agg 0-1);
Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz) 1-0 Simba Bhora (Zim) (agg 1-1, *Nsingizini Hotspurs win 4-2 on pens*);
Simba (Tan) 1-1 Gaborone United (Bot) (agg 2-1);
Rivers United (Nga) 1-0 Aigles du Congo (Cod) (agg 1-0);
ASEC Mimosas (Civ) 1-0 Power Dynamos (Zam) (agg 1-1, *Power Dynamos win 5-4 on pens*)

Oct 4:
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 0-0 Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) (agg 0-1)

Oct 5:
Pyramids (Egy) 3-0 APR (Rwa) (agg 5-0)

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

First Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Sep 16:
Foresters Mont Fleuri (Sey) 1-0 15 de Agosto (Eqg)

Sep 19:
USFA (Bfa) 1-0 AS Gbohloe-Su (Tgo);
ASN Nigelec (Nig) 0-1 Olympic Safi (Mar);
Aigle Royal (Cmr) 0-1 San Pedro (Civ);
Wolaitta Dicha (Eth) 0-0 Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby)

Sep 20:
Bhantal (Sle) 0-3 Hafia (Gui);
Stade Tunisien (Tun) 2-0 ASC Snim (Mtn);
NEC FC (Uga) 2-2 Nairobi United (Ken);
Al Ahli Madani (Sdn) 1-0 Etoile du Sahel (Tun);
Al Merreikh Bentiu (Ssd) 0-2 Azam (Tan);
Flambeau du Centre (Bdi) 2-1 Al Akhdar (Lby);
Rayon Sports (Rwa) 0-1 Singida Black Stars (Tan);
FC 105 Libreville (Gab) 2-0 ZESCO United (Zam);
Kabuscorp (Ang) 1-0 Kaizer Chiefs (RSA);
Young African (Nam) 0-2 Royal Leopards (Swz)

Sep 21:
Asante Kotoko (Gha) 4-3 Kwara United (Nga);
Generation Foot (Sen) 1-1 AFAD Djekanou (Civ);
Abia Warriors (Nga) 1-1 Djoliba (Mli);
Black Man Warrior (Lbr) 0-0 Coton FC (Ben);
Dekedaha (Som) 1-0 Al Zamala (Sdn);
AS Port (Dji) 1-2 KMKM (Zan);
Mighty Wanderers (Mwi) 1-0 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot);
Ferroviario de Maputo (Moz) 1-1
AS Fanalamanga (Mad);
Primeiro de Agosto (Ang) 1-2 AS Otoho (Cgo)

Sep 26:
Maniema Union (Cod) 2-1 Pamplemousses (Mri)

Sep 28:
AS Simba (Cod) 1-0 Djabal d'Iconi (Com)

First Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Sep 21:
15 de Agosto (Eqg) 4-0 Foresters Mont Fleuri (Sey) (agg 4-1)

Sep 26:
Kwara United (Nga) 0-1 Asante Kotoko (Gha) (agg 3-5);
Hafia (Gui) 2-3 Bhantal (Sle) (agg 5-3);
Coton FC (Ben) 4-1 Black Man Warrior (Lbr) (agg 4-1);
Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby) 3-1 Wolaitta Dicha (Eth) (agg 3-1);
KMKM (Zan) 2-1 AS Port (Dji) (agg 4-2);
Royal Leopards (Swz) 5-0 Young African (Nam) (agg 7-0);
AS Fanalamanga (Mad) 1-2 Ferroviario de Maputo (Moz) (agg 2-3)

Sep 27:
AFAD Djekanou (Civ) 5-3 Generation Foot (Sen) (agg 6-4);

Olympic Safi (Mar) 5-0 ASN Nigelec (Nig) (agg 6-0);
ASC Snim (Mtn) 0-0 Stade Tunisien (Tun) (agg 0-2);
San Pedro (Civ) 2-2 Aigle Royal (Cmr) (agg 3-2);
Al Zamala (Sdn) 2-1 Dekedaha (Som) (agg 2-2, *Dekedaha win on away goals*);
Nairobi United (Ken) 1-1 NEC FC (Uga) (agg 3-3, *Nairobi United win on away goals*);
Etoile du Sahel (Tun) 3-0 Al Ahli Madani (Sdn) (agg 3-1);
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 2-1 Rayon Sports (Rwa) (agg 3-1);
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1-0 Mighty Wanderers (Mwi) (agg 1-1, *Jwaneng Galaxy win 7-6 on pens*);
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1-0 Kabuscorp (Ang) (agg 1-1 *Kaizer Chiefs win 5-4 on pens*)

Sep 28:
AS Gbohloe-Su (Tgo) 0-2 USFA (Bfa) (agg 0-3);
Djoliba (Mli) 1-0 Abia Warriors (Nga) (agg 2-1);
Azam (Tan) 2-0 Al Merreikh Juba (Ssd) (agg 4-0);
Al Akhdar (Lby) 2-2 Flambeau du Centre (Bdi) (agg 3-4);
ZESCO United (Zam) 5-0 FC 105 Libreville (Gab) (agg 5-2);
AS Otoho (Cgo) 0-0 Primeiro de Agosto (Ang) (agg 2-1)

Oct 3:
Pamplemousses (Mri) 2-2 Maniema Union (Cod) (agg 3-4)

Oct 4:
Djabal d'Iconi (Com) 0-2 AS Simba (Cod) (agg 0-3)

Final Tables 2025

SAO TOME & PRINCIPE

Sao Tome Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vitoria do Riboque*	22	13	7	2	39	14	46
Praia Cruz	22	12	6	4	51	24	42
UD Rei Amador	22	13	3	6	54	29	39
Trindade	22	10	5	7	38	27	35
Desportivo de Juba	22	10	4	8	47	37	34
DM 6 de Setembro	22	8	7	7	34	37	31
Agro-Sport de Monte Cafe	22	7	7	8	29	38	28
UDESCAI	22	7	4	11	34	43	25
Inter FC de Bom-Bom	22	6	5	11	21	32	23
FC Aliança Nacional	22	4	8	10	32	49	20
Desportivo Oque d'El Rei (R)	22	4	7	11	27	46	19
CD Guadalupe (R)	22	5	1	16	25	61	16

*Advance to final

Principe Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sport Operarios e Benfica* (C)	18	16	1	1	46	12	49
CD 1º de Maio	18	13	3	2	52	12	42
GD Sundy	18	7	2	9	24	36	23
Porto Real	18	4	5	9	21	33	17
SC do Principe	18	4	2	12	18	36	14
UDAPB	18	2	3	13	15	47	9

*Advance to final

Final

Sep 13:
Vitoria do Riboque 0-1 Sport Operarios e Benfica

Sep 20:
Sport Operarios e Benfica 0-0 Vitoria do Riboque (agg 1-0)

OCEANIA

Final Tables 2025

FIJI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rewa (C)	18	13	4	1	51	13	43
Labasa	18	11	4	3	45	24	37
Lautoka	18	11	1	6	30	23	34
Ba	18	7	6	5	41	23	27
Navua	18	8	2	8	22	25	26
Suva	18	5	8	5	29	24	23
Nadi	18	5	5	8	31	35	20
Nadroga	18	5	4	9	26	41	19
Nasinu	18	5	3	10	28	56	18
Tavua (R)	18	0	3	15	12	51	3

NEW CALEDONIA

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tiga Sport* (C)	8	7	1	0	18	5	30
Gaica*	8	4	2	2	15	11	22
Hienghene Sport*	8	3	2	3	17	13	19
Horizon Sport de Patho**	8	2	3	3	15	15	17
Mont-Dore**	8	0	0	8	9	30	8

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Advance to finals stage*
***Enter play-off*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Magenta*	8	6	1	1	19	9	27
Lossi*	8	5	1	2	17	10	24
Kunie*	8	3	3	2	15	10	20
Saint Louis**	8	1	2	5	9	24	13
Ne Drehu**	8	1	1	6	9	16	12

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Advance to finals stage*
***Enter play-off*

Finals Stage

Play-Offs

Aug 9:
Horizon Sport de Patho 4-2 Ne Drehu (*AET*);
Mont-Dore 0-3 Saint Louis

Quarter-Finals

Aug 23:
Horizon Sport de Patho 2-2 Saint Louis (*AET, Saint Louis win 5-4 on pens*)

Sep 6-7:
Gaica 3-2 Lossi (*AET*);
Magenta 2-3 Hienghene Sport;
Tiga Sport 2-0 Kunie

Semi-Finals

Sep 13:
Saint Louis 2-3 Tiga Sport (*AET*);
Gaica 3-0 Hienghene Sport

Final

Sep 27: Tiga Sport 3-1 Gaica

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group A

Nov 14: Luxembourg v Germany;
Slovakia v Northern Ireland
Nov 17: Northern Ireland v Luxembourg;
Germany v Slovakia

Group B

Nov 15: Slovenia v Kosovo;
Switzerland v Sweden
Nov 18: Kosovo v Switzerland;
Sweden v Slovenia

Group C

Nov 15: Greece v Scotland; Denmark v Belarus
Nov 18: Belarus v Greece; Scotland v Denmark

Group D

Nov 13: Azerbaijan v Iceland; France v Ukraine
Nov 16: Azerbaijan v France; Ukraine v Iceland

Group E

Nov 15: Georgia v Spain; Turkey v Bulgaria
Nov 18: Bulgaria v Georgia; Spain v Turkey

Group F

Nov 13: Armenia v Hungary;
Republic of Ireland v Portugal
Nov 16: Hungary v Republic of Ireland;
Portugal v Armenia

Group G

Nov 14: Finland v Malta; Poland v Netherlands
Nov 17: Malta v Poland; Netherlands v Lithuania

Group H

Nov 15: Cyprus v Austria;
Bosnia & Herzegovina v Romania
Nov 18: Austria v Bosnia & Herzegovina;
Romania v San Marino

Group I

Nov 13: Norway v Estonia; Moldova v Italy
Nov 16: Israel v Moldova; Italy v Norway

Group J

Nov 15: Kazakhstan v Belgium;
Liechtenstein v Wales
Nov 18: Belgium v Liechtenstein;
Wales v North Macedonia

Group K

Nov 13: Andorra v Albania; England v Serbia
Nov 16: Albania v England; Serbia v Latvia

Group L

Nov 14: Gibraltar v Montenegro;
Croatia v Faroe Islands
Nov 17: Czech Republic v Gibraltar;
Montenegro v Croatia

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Second Round

Semi-final and final play-offs involving four best group stage runners-up take place Nov 10-18

CONCACAF Section

● *13 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

Third Round

Group A

Nov 13: Guatemala v Panama;
Suriname v El Salvador
Nov 18: Panama v El Salvador;
Guatemala v Suriname

Group B

Nov 13: Trinidad & Tobago v Jamaica;
Bermuda v Curacao
Nov 18: Jamaica v Curacao;
Trinidad & Tobago v Bermuda

Group C

Nov 13: Haiti v Costa Rica;
Nicaragua v Honduras
Nov 18: Costa Rica v Honduras;
Haiti v Nicaragua

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Fifth Round

Two-legged play-offs involving fourth round runners-up take place Nov 13 and 18

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFYING

Group A

Nov 18: Timor-Leste v Tajikistan;
Maldives v Philippines

Group B

Nov 18: Brunei v Lebanon; Yemen v Bhutan

Group C

Nov 18: Bangladesh v India;
Hong Kong v Singapore

Group D

Nov 18: Sri Lanka v Thailand;
Turkmenistan v Chinese Taipei

Group E

Nov 18: Pakistan v Syria;
Afghanistan v Myanmar

Group F

Nov 18: Laos v Vietnam; Nepal v Malaysia

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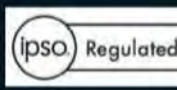

Giuseppe Rossi

Fiorentina v Juventus

2013-14 Serie A, Stadio Artemio Franchi, Florence

In October 2013, the Italy striker wrote himself into Fiorentina folklore with a stunning hat-trick against their biggest rivals to secure La Viola's first home win against Juve in 15 years

Hat-trick hero ...Giuseppe Rossi takes the match ball after his treble

There's a big rivalry between the two teams and hours before kick-off, as we headed to the stadium, there were already thousands of people on the streets chanting and going crazy. My team-mates from Florence explained why this was the biggest game of the year. I could feel it.

But it started badly for us and we were 2-0 down at half-time. After Carlos Tevez and Paul Pogba scored, they both copied Gabriel Batistuta's famous celebration, where he went down on one knee and pretended to shoot at the crowd. That really irked the fans. Fiorentina hadn't beaten Juventus at home since 1998, when Batistuta was still playing.

Back in the dressing room, the coach Vincenzo Montella said one simple thing to motivate us: "Games like this put players on the map. How do you guys want to be remembered?" It was more of a psychological change than anything tactical. We just wanted that first goal to put the pressure on.

When we got a penalty, I knew it was important to score and really shift the momentum. I was always comfortable taking penalties, but this was against Gigi Buffon. I'd taken a couple against him when training with the national team, so I wanted to change it up a bit. I'd usually wait for the goalkeeper to move, but Gigi's not stupid – that's what he was waiting for – so this time I didn't do it. I just ran up to the ball and slotted it in.

The second goal came when Matias Fernandez played me the ball. I got past Pogba in a tight little area and shot from outside the box. Sometimes, when you hit the ball so cleanly, it moves in the air and that's what happened. When Gigi put out his hand, he couldn't reach it. Now it was 2-2 and the crowd was going wild.

Juventus were on the back foot, while we had so much energy and momentum. Joaquin scored our third goal after I made a movement to drag Giorgio Chiellini away from him. I was so tired I couldn't even celebrate. Me and Juan Cuadrado had to sit on one of the advertising boards just to catch our breath!

Juventus started pushing. They put in a cross and Gonzalo Rodriguez headed it out. Borja Valero took a beautiful touch into the path of Cuadrado and boom, we were off. Cuadrado's really quick but I was able to keep up with him on the counter-attack. He played the ball through to me. I was a confident finisher, so I took the shot first time and curled it in for 4-2. Pandemonium. I fell to the ground and there were players all over me.

That was my first professional hat-trick and to get it in that fashion, against Juventus – the team that's won everything so many times – was really special. I was subbed off with five minutes left and I got a standing ovation. I felt like I'd conquered the world. I re-watched the whole game the day after and saw grown men crying.

Juventus won the title that season with a record points tally (102). They were stacked with world-class players and only lost one more game in the league after that. Their defence – that back three of Chiellini, Bonucci and Barzagli, with Buffon behind them – will go down as one of the best in football history. They were all my international team-mates and it was great to measure myself against them. You always want to challenge yourself and show the world your talent.

During that year, after so many knee injuries, I was trying to prove people wrong, and prove to myself that I was still capable of playing at a high level. I was one of the top scorers and best players in Serie A at that time. That game made me feel invincible again, like I had back at Villarreal.

> "My team-mates from Florence explained why this was the biggest game of the year. I could feel it"

Every October 20, on the anniversary of this game, I get hundreds of messages from Fiorentina supporters. They call me "Saint Pepito," which is pretty cool. It's always good to know that you left a mark in a city like Florence, with such a historic team.

Interview by Sean Cole

"I just ran up to the ball and slotted it in" ...Rossi scores from the penalty spot

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